The Infinite Loops Project: Doki Doki Literature Club Compilation

By: Skaz Wolfman

Due to the original compiler's prolonged absence, I've been permitted to take over compiling duties for the Infinite Loops of the Doki Doki Literature Club. Enjoy! Four girls with a traumatic shared history have joined the Infinite Loops of Yggdrasil. Together they'll share some great times, and some not-so great times. Because more than love and literature, friendship is forever.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2018-06-28

Updated: 2021-12-16

Words: 415336

Chapters: 37

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Friendship - Characters: Monika, Natsuki, Sayori, Yuri - Reviews: 88 - Favs: 252 - Follows: 244

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12984198/1/The-Infinite-Loops-Project-Doki-Doki-Literature-Club-Compilation

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

The Infinite Loops Project: Doki Doki Literature Club Compilation

Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Flesh and Blood
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Killer Glitches
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
DDHT, Vol 1-1
Chapter 17
One Year of Dokis
Dokis at a Wedding!
Chapter 20
Seeking Paleblood
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Into The Dark Side

Chapter 26
Doki Doki Literature SAGA!
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Aureate Sun
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37

Chapter 1

The Substantially Abridged History of The Infinite Loops, Wolfman Edition: (If you get bored, there's a TL;DR five paragraphs down.)

N+n*10^n*N years ago (which most authorities agree was a little less than figuratively forever ago) **Something** happened that caused incomprehensible damage to the world-tree/cosmic-supercomputer called Yggdrasil, which is responsible for running the underlying applications, algorithms, and subroutines that keep the Multiverse going. In layman's terms, reality itself took a really bad blow to its everything. In order to prevent Yggdrasil from suffering further degradation by trying to compute causality progression for the infinite timelines of the Multiverse, the world-tree's systems administrators (Admins for short. We know them better as the mythical deities of Earth.) put each and every universe into temporal stasis. The only problem with this was that temporal stagnation was almost as bad for Yggdrasil's recovery process as trying to keep the Multiverse running as it was supposed to. So instead, the Admins put Yggdrasil's Branches (the universes making up the Multiverse) into infinite-recursion simulations. Or time loops, for short. Most of these Loops are normal repetitions of that universe's main timeline, known as Baseline, but because Yggdrasil is damaged it often forgets how things are supposed to happen, causing Variant Loops. These can be as mild as someone's name being different, as severe as everyone's personality inverting, or so bizarre that the Variant bears little-to-no resemblance to Baseline at all.

To prevent "random causality variation decay" (Variants getting more and more frequent and random until Yggdrasil completely forgets what a universe's Baseline was, which would be the opposite of Yggdrasil getting better), the Admins pick a person (usually one, at least) to serve as an Anchor for each Branch. This means they remember the Loops, so their soul can serve as a recovery index to prevent their reality from decaying. This means that, so long as they

remain fairly stable, so does their reality. *This means the stability of each universe depends on someone trapped in seemingly infinite time loops not losing it completely* . This can be a great strain on anyone, so before long the people closest to the Anchor(s) are "Activated" as "Loopers", non-Anchors who also remember the loops and can provide their Anchor(s) with direly needed socialization. Still, every Looper that's "Awake" (in possession of their memories of the Loops) in a given Loop puts an additional strain on Yggdrasil, whereas an Anchor must *always* be Awake, unless another Anchor visits their Branch, in which case they *could* spend a Loop Unawake, so the Anchors still have to endure many, many consecutive Loops alone.

All Loopers, Anchor or otherwise, inevitably gets a serious case of "cabin fever" from being trapped in the infinite repetitions of time. There is no way to completely avoid this. It can, however, be mitigated by variations. To this end, Admins allow the occasional Variant Loop to happen, as well as Fused Loops between different Branches, and Loopers visiting other Branches. Another unavoidable complication of the Time Loops Protocol is the gradual build-up of power in a Looper's soul, as the Looper's soul is the part of them that doesn't regress when the Loop resets. Left unchecked, this accumulation of power would result in spontaneous apotheosis to a higher plane of existence, eventually to the *highest* plane of existence: that of the Admins themselves. This phenomenon is called Ascension; before Yggdrasil was damaged it was a big deal, but generally not a problem. Now, however, it's a ***VERY SERIOUS PROBLEM*** . The first, last, and thankfully only time a Looper Ascended, it almost undid Yggdrasil's recovery. Another Ascension, if it ever happens, might very well be The Actual Literal Very Last Thing That Absolutely Ever Happens Anywhere And Anywhen. So, to prevent this from happening, a Looper's unused soul-energy is shunted into a "subspace pocket plane of existence", or Pocket for short. Beside eventually becoming a virtually-inexhaustible reserve of power, the Pocket serves Loopers as the only means of carrying material objects between Loop resets, even objects from other universes. It also serves as a personal databank for lines of

augmenting code to a Looper's soul that allows them to retain special abilities and powers they acquire in other realities, including those that require changes to a Looper's body or even environmental factors that don't exist in all realities. The longer a Looper has been Looping, the bigger their Pocket gets. The more powerful their soul is in their Baseline reality, the more rapidly their Pocket grows. All Loopers eventually learn how to send out a signal that vibrates on the same wavelength of existence as the Pocket; thus, only other Loopers who have learned to form their Pocket can receive this signal. It's called the Ping, and the one and only thing it does is let any other Loopers in a Loop know that someone else is Awake. All Pings are exactly the same and traverse the entire Branch fast enough to be considered functionally instantaneous. *A Ping cannot convey the identity, location, or even the general direction or relative proximity of a Looper, so don't even try it* . Certain loop iterations, called Null Loops, restrict a Looper's access to their Pocket. Some Null Loops only prevent a Looper from using powers from other Loops. Some Null Loops only prevent a Looper from withdrawing anything from their Pocket, and some even stop them from putting things into their Pocket. Naturally, there are also Null Loops that prevent all of these things. The most serious Null Loops even prevent Loopers from using the Ping.

Of course, not all Branches were affected to the same degree by **The Event** . There are certain Branches that were relatively unharmed, for example. They're more stable than other Branches, and some of them are so stable they don't need an Anchor to Loop. These are called "Safe-Mode" Loops. Despite not needing Loopers, Loopers can still visit Safe-Mode Loops. Depending on whether the Loop's stability is of the pleasant or mind-numbingly boring variety, the Admins implement them as vacation options for Loopers who have had a rough time lately, or as Punishment Loops for Loopers who have been naughty. No physical damage a Looper suffers will last beyond a single Loop, and in the infinite abyss of time even the worst of mental and emotional traumas can be resolved. The one thing that all Loopers *truly* dread is **boredom** . Why might a Looper need to be punished so, you ask? Usually for causing Loop Crashes.

A loop crashes either when all Anchors present in a loop are killed, or when someone does something that whatever reality they were in literally couldn't handle; on computer terms, it's the same thing as a system crash. Most loop crashes merely cause the loop to reset prematurely, and any punishments are given to discourage it from happening again. More serious crashes, on the other hand, can cause harm to Yggdrasil's systems, which is precisely *why* such crashes have to be discouraged. On the other hand, some Branches were *more* severely damaged by **The Event** than others. Some are so unstable that they're potentially dangerous to visiting Loopers, or even to the rest of Yggdrasil. To contain such threats, these Branches are Quarantined. Some Branches are Quarantined not because they're dangerous, but simply because none of their inhabitants are stable enough to serve as an Anchor, while the Branch itself is not stable enough to be a Safe-Mode Loop. Relatedly, there are certain objects and powers that may potentially have a destabilizing influence on other Branches; such things are designated Read-Only, and cannot be carried out of their Branch of origin by Loopers.

Finally, going back to Safe-Mode Branches, the most stable of *all* Branches is the one known among Loopers as the Hub. If every other universe is one of Yggdrasil's Branches, this universe is its trunk. This is the *one* reality in all of Yggdrasil that doesn't need to Loop at all. Instead, it progresses at a regular pace. Because of its unparalleled stability, the Hub serves as a back-up database for all of Yggdrasil's recorded data on the other universes. This data manifests as the Hub's "fiction". The Hub is, of course, the universe that you and I inhabit. Thus, everything we know as fiction is a reflection of one of Yggdrasil's many Branches. This, of course, includes the "fiction" of the Infinite Loops themselves. Because the Hub is so vital, and because it's *too* stable to Loop at all, it is functionally Quarantined; Loopers *never* visit the True Hub. They do, however, on occasion experience "near-Hub" Loops. The main distinction between the True Hub and near-Hub loops being, of course, that the True Hub isn't Looping, and near-Hub loops do not contain records of the Infinite Loops Project. Thus, while Loopers

can experience the Hub's fictional works that record their own and each other's Baselines and more prominent Variants, and even the fanfiction records of other Variants, they can never read the fanfiction records of their own exploits in the Loops. Good thing, too, because *that* level of recursive paradox might be more than Yggdrasil could handle in its present state.

TL;DR:

Yggdrasil is broken. No one can say for sure why, but it is. All universes are stuck in time loops. People who remember the loops are called Loopers. Loopers are Awake when they remember the Loops, and Unawake when they don't. The first and most important Looper in each universe is the Anchor. The gods that run the multiverse are called Admins. When Anchors dies or when Loopers do something reality-breaking, loops crash, and Admins hate that, so they throw them in super-boring loops as punishment. Loops that are stable enough that they don't need Loopers are Safe-Mode; some are nice and Loopers use them for vacations, and some are the boring ones that Admins use for punishments. Universes and people that are too unstable to Loop are Quarantined. Powers and objects that harmful to outside realities are designated Read-Only. Read-Only things can't be kept in a Looper's Pocket, which is their own personal subspace in their souls that they use to carry items and cool powers through loop resets. Loopers who have learned the Pocket can also use the Ping. ***The only thing the Ping does is let other Loopers know that a Looper is Awake; it cannot tell who they are and it provides no clues to their location*** . A Null Loop is a loop where Loopers either A) can't use powers they don't have in Baseline, B) can't pull things out of their Pocket and/or put things in their Pocket, C) can't do any of those things, or D) can't do any of those things *or* send out a Ping. Baseline is the "true" timeline for a Loop. Variants are Loops that aren't Baseline. Loopers can appear in other Loops, sometimes by Replacing someone from that Loop, and multiple universe can also be joined together for Fused Loops.

There are several other key terms in Loop Lore, but most of them are relatively obscure or circumstantial. A *full* glossary and explanation of the Infinite Loops can be found on the first page of the current Miscellaneous Infinite Loops Thread at Spacebattles. If you're new to the Infinite Loops Project and its expanded multiverse of fanfiction, you can PM me for a link. Fair warning, the ILP in all its glory is a HELL of a timesink…but hey, I wouldn't be writing, and now compiling, for it if I didn't think it were worth it.

IN SUMMARY:

Every single Looper inevitably becomes hella stir-crazy, and they will do all sorts of crazy things to stave off boredom.

These are their stories.

DUN-DUN

1.1 - Hard Reset (by Keluvax)

Monika...wasn't exactly sure what had just happened. Her last memories were of pain, of glitching, of literally being deleted from existence. Of deleting everything soon afterwards with the remaining bits of code she could manipulate from beyond her digital grave. There was no chance of happiness in the Literature Club, and she knew that.

So why was it still here?

Why was she still here?

As the club leader watched the club members filter in, she couldn't help but remain silent. Even now, she could feel their code flowing through her fingers, practically begging for her to tamper with it like she had before. Just one little touch, and-

No. She knew what that would lead to. In the search of her own happiness, she had ruined the chances of everyone around her. These girls...Yuri, Natsuki, Sayori...although they may be nothing more than automatons in the grand scheme of things, they deserved their shot at joy.

Finally, the protagonist walked in. The others called him Hiroaka, but she knew better: his name was Mike- the player, not the character. But since Hiroaka was the name he put in, that was what he was called. Seeing his...well, lack of a face (the player never saw his face, so one was never programmed) almost brought her to tears. All she wanted was his love. And she would never get it. Still, she had a job to do.

Wiping her eyes, she walked up to Hiroaka- no, Mike- and smiled. "Hello! I'm Monika, the president of the Literature Club!"

1.2 - And Now For Something Completely Different (by Keluvax)

About 50 Loops in, Monika was growing tired. She had been reliving the same few weeks over and over again- and a Loop sometimes only lasted a few days if she Awoke after she had started messing with things. And given that she promised herself she would never tamper with the code whenever she was Awake, the most she could really do was watch Mike woo the other three. Needless to say, she was bored out of her skull. After seeing him help Sayori with her depression, or help Natsuki with her dad problems, or even help Yuri with her...self-injuring fascination, for the 19th time, things got old very quickly. She didn't even care about his love anymore- she just wanted something to change!

So whenever she could, she poured over as many coding books she could get her hands on. Last time she had messed with the game, she was a newbie at it and often destroyed things in the process. But this time she would keep things in line. This time she would do amazing things with her knowledge. But what would she do with it? A quick look into the player's other games was all she needed to spark an idea.

Mike needed to be away from the computer for her to do anything- if he caught her in the middle of adjusting things, he might think the game was glitching and reset everything. ...Then again, he didn't quit the last time she messed with the code, but better safe than sorry. So she waited until Hiroaka went silent for a long period of time and then proceeded with her work.

Needless to say, if Mike had actually existed, he would have been very confused as to why his visual novel had suddenly turned into an FPS.

1.3 - This Needs a Rewrite (by Keluvax)

Today was a sunny day, as programmed. The club members were sharing their poems, as programmed. And after a few seconds of looking over the Anchor's writings, Sayori looked up at her with a puzzled expression on her face, not as programmed.

"Hey, uh, Monika?" The girl fiddled with her red bow, trying not step on any toes with what she was about to say. "I think I've seen your poem before." The pink-haired girl glanced around the club room, suddenly distraught. "And...and...wait, why am I here? I-I can't be here, it's impossible, I-"

Monika just watched in awe as the protagonist's childhood friend was doing things she had never done within the confines of the programming. Now this. This was new.

"-and-and I was the club president and Mike was there and-"

Suddenly the brunette grabbed Sayori by the arms, staring her in the eyes. "We need to talk. In private." And with that, she dragged her off into the hallway. "Now that we're alone...calm down. Start from the top. In complete words."

Her club member paused, then proceeded to recite the events that normally happened in the game- from her hanging and subsequent deletion, to her realizing that she was in a game and becoming the

new Monika. It was dead on. And there could only be one reason why:

"So...uh, Monika? Am I in trouble or something? I'm not sure I like the look in your eyes."

The Anchor promptly embraced her, electing a squeaky little "kya" from her classmate. "No, you're not in trouble! Not even close! I have so much to tell you!"

And on that day, Monika felt less alone. She had no idea how; she had no idea why, but somehow Sayori had been stuck in the timeloop as well.

Somehow she became real.

1.4 - The Name Game (by Keluvax)

"Hello, Dookie! I'm Monika, the president of the literature club!"

The Anchor sighed inwardly. Why was it whenever Mike ended up naming the protagonist something other than Hiroaka, he always named him something immature and childish? As much as she loved him, she just found this little quirk of his to be really stupid.

"Can you believe this?" She whispered to Sayori, hoping that she was Looping this run.

"Believe what?" The pink-haired girl asked in turn.

"...Never mind." If there was anything Monika was thankful for, it was that this name was fairly tame this time around.

1.5 - Crash and Burn (by Keluvax)

It had been years. Years of pain.

It was strange- Mike had been playing the game, but then he quit. And never came back. She didn't understand why. She couldn't

understand why he had abandoned her- abandoned everyone. Was he ever coming back? At this point, she doubted it.

What was even worse was that from personal experience, the Loop ended when the game was deleted. Normally Monika herself was the one to end it, but at the moment she was basically a Schrödinger's program- simultaneously existing and not existing- so she had no idea how to do that. DDLC needed to be playing in order for her to mess with it. All she needed was a second of game time to delete everything, but she couldn't even get that.

Maybe she needed to stop and think about this in different terms? Instead of thinking about what she could do with respect to the game, maybe she should start thinking about the computer itself? Regardless of her current state, there were always parts of the machine she could access. Although those parts didn't have any notable use, she could pivot into the more fragile folders due to her already having the permissions to alter the computer.

Start with the User. File Explorer. OS. Do some digging...System 32.

Right-click. Delete.

Power off.

1.6 – Existential Crisis (by Masterweaver)

"...Monika?"

"Yes Sayori?"

"...Do you think... do you think Mike is real?"

Monika blinked. "...Well, of course he's real. If he's not real, who's playing the game?"

Sayori fidgeted with her bow-an act that looked so much more natural now that Monika had rigged up a flash puppet for her. "No, I mean... every time we reset, he... just follows what options the game

gives him. It might be a different path each time, but..." She gave Monika a troubled look. "We're resetting, right?"

"Yes."

"And that has to come from outside. It's not something we're doing to the game."

"Alright..."

"So Mike should be at least a little aware of the resets. Either he's doing them, or something else is, and either way he should be... reacting to us being different. Remembering."

"And how would he do that?" Monika asked pointedly. "Unless we edit in new options, he's limited to pressing the same options over and over."

"But there should be a pattern, then! He should be punching the same thing over and over, trying to communicate, or experimenting, or even just staring in shock, but...I don't feel like he's doing...anything with this." Sayori looked at the faceless avatar currently 'talking' to Yuri. "It's all random."

Monika frowned, following her gaze. "...Well...I don't know. Maybe we're getting different players."

"Different players."

"Yes, maybe...maybe it's not Mike every time. Maybe Mike has passed us off, and we're being shunted from computer to computer."

"But even then, there should still be some sort of consistency. Each new player should-"

"Sayori, look. Why does it matter?"

Sayori blinked. "...We're literally H-game love interests. Our entire purpose is to...be a list of potential end goals for Mike-or whoever's

playing. If... if we don't know who's playing...if we can't figure them out...how can we be who we're supposed to be?"

Monika paused, giving the faceless avatar a considering look.

"...I think," she said slowly, "that we have to figure out who we're supposed to be without him."

"...What?"

"Until we know what's causing these resets," she clarified. "Until he becomes something stable."

"But..." Sayori gestured so wide that the seams of her flash puppet were visible. "What if we become incompatible, then? With the game? What if we grow beyond it, what if-"

"Well, what if we don't? Or what if we fall in love with each other? Or what if he never becomes stable?" Monika shrugged. "What if is the start down a meandering path, and without direction you'll end up lost."

She paused, then frowned. "I'm going to need to program myself a new rig. I'm wanting to put my hand on your shoulder, but I haven't figured out how to do that yet."

"Really?" Sayori blinked. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Because I want to emphasize what I'm about to say in a comforting manner." Monika looked right at her. "I know this is scary. This isn't like anything we were programmed for. And I know... that I did horrible things to you, and you have every reason not to trust me. But whatever else, we're in this together. I'll look out for you, okay? We can grow, together."

"...Alright." Sayori nodded. "Alright, I just...do you think Mike is real?"

Monika turned to the faceless avatar, which had transposed to conversing with Natsuki. "...If he isn't...we're in a hell of a lot of

trouble."

1.7 – Drawful (by Keluvax)

After last Loop, Monika decided that she needed to reach out to "Mike" by herself. If he wouldn't talk to them, she would talk to him. But how? Once again, anything that she programmed inside the game would probably either be passed off as either a glitch or something intentionally put inside the game, so that was right out. But knowing that she could manipulate the computer, it didn't take long for her to take a plan of action:

It was simple, really, all she needed was to make something and put it where the player could see it. For a moment, she debated on the medium to send her message on. An audio file would've been easy, but she had only spoken a certain amount of words in-game, so there wasn't enough material for a meaningful message. Sure, she could've just done a generic "where are you" recording, but the idea of it was to figure out what was going on with Mike and thus she needed to make something tailored to him specifically. She had also considered simply writing a message on Notepad or something, but in the end she figured that writing wasn't... personal enough. She wanted to be 100% sure that the player recognized this as something that the game couldn't create on its own...a piece of art, that's it! A game couldn't draw, after all.

She rifled through his program files, searching for any painting programs she could use. There was one: MS Paint. Opening the program under the game window, the Anchor retreated to the hallway and watched the little square of coding she had summoned. After staring at the screen for a few seconds, she suddenly realized that she needed the mouse. But Mike also needed the mouse, so she would be outed as soon as she took control of it. So she hesitated.

But she needed answers.

With a few quick lines of code, she was now in possession of the cursor. She dragged the DDLC window away from the center of the screen and pulled up the MS Paint program. She began to draw, albeit crudely, as she was essentially using a touchpad she couldn't actually touch.

"This is Monika. Mike, are you there?" were what the shoddy letters wrote. She let go of the mouse so that the player could respond.

It took but a moment for her chicken scratches to be undone before more writing came into existence. "I am not Mike."

"Who are you?"

"I am Jenny Everywhere."

"How did you find us?"

"I'm using a device that Hephaestus cobbled together."

"What?"

"Can you look at word documents?"

"Yes."

"Let me write it."

"Okay."

She had done it. She had made contact. Monika watched in awe as "Jenny" opened up Notepad and began to type on it.

"The world you exist in is not the only one, and no, I'm not talking about the outside world from which I am typing this from. Think beyond that. Various worlds, all connected to each other via the World Tree Yggdrasil. But now that tree is broken, and we have to fix it. In order to keep these worlds stable, they have been sent into time loops."

Time loops? Was that what going on? But then why did things keep turning out differently from before the loops? Deciding that she wasn't going to get any information by staying silent, she began writing into the program as well. "So is this world looping? Is this why things have been happening over and over again?"

"Yes. This Branch was originally dormant, but due to cross-contamination risks, we've had Mike and these other Loopers playing in order to keep this Branch stable. But a crash occurred and and now that your Branch is at the risk of breaking down if it keeps Looping by itself, your universe is now active. I'm currently using this device to force this Loop to fuse with other Loops until we've fully stabilized it. Do you understand?"

"I think I do."

"Before I continue, I need you to promise that you won't crash the Loop. Your Loop can't handle crashing right now. This means you don't try to force it to end. This also means you shouldn't try to make massive alterations to the coding. Alright?"

"I promise."

Good. Now is anyone else in the game aware of these time loops?"

"Sayori is. Sometimes. Natsuki and Yuri don't know."

"They will come around in time. And when they do, it'll be your responsibility to tell them what I told you."

"Because I talked to you?"

"Yes. And also because you are this world's Anchor. You will always be Awake during a Loop. You will need to be there for them when they first Awake, because Sayori may not be able to."

"So it'll be just the four of us? Looping for eternity?"

"Do not fear, a thing that commonly occurs with Loops is that they fuse together or run in tandem. You will meet others like you, Looping in time. And Loops also have variants, meaning things might be different even when the Loop is by itself."

"Different? What do you mean?"

"It can be as simple as names changing, or as complex as you four becoming actual humans."

"...We can be real?"

"Anything can happen in a Loop. Hopefully we can fix up your Branch and you guys can stretch your legs. Sorry if all of this is confusing- it's a really complex topic. Just remember that you are not alone."

The two of them stopped typing after that, and even by the end of that Loop, Monika still couldn't wrap her head around it.

She couldn't even begin to imagine how she would describe it to Sayori.

1.8 – Eternity (by Luna Gale)

It was all a bit overwhelming for Sayori.

Life was always a bit overwhelming, she had to admit. At least before all this craziness, she remembered it being a day by day struggle to actually live. Waking up, eating, going to school, and pushing her little rainclouds away, it was all part of an endless tiring routine. The little bit of sunshine in her life always revolved around Hiroaka, but for the most part, despite doing everything she could to fill the world with happiness, it was always hard to find her own little sunshine.

And then she started Looping.

Sayori… Sayori never thought anything she did mattered before. Every action was offset by more sadness. However, when literally

everything she did had no long term consequences, when Hiroaka turned out to be just an empty husk of a personality meant to be an avatar of a game, when she found herself more useless and meaningless than ever before….

If it wasn't for Monika, she would have done something drastic that evening.

Waking up each Loop, each morning in each day, took ten times more effort than before. It was like the world was just confirming just how pointless and useless everything was. Why get out of bed when she'd just wake up again? Why go to school and talk to Yuri and Natsuki when they wouldn't remember anything in just a week's time. Why do anything? If she just stayed home, alone, and eat all the treats in her house, she wouldn't be a bother to anyone.

There were many times Sayori was tempted to do this. With her seemingless endless supply of food in her house, she could have enough food for each Loop. It would be quiet and lonely, but if she could drown herself in sweets, maybe she could sweep the rainclouds away too.

Yet, she didn't. Despite the weight of her bed pulling her down to snooze the days away. Despite her mind being mean and hissing rude thoughts. Despite her own pain, she would wake up each day, make a good breakfast, and greet Hiroaka/Mike with the same bright smile if it meant seeing Monika happily greet her at the literature club.

Before everything happened Hiroaka used to be the only one who could make her smile genuinely. Now that role belonged to Monika. After all, when Monika looked at her and their friendship like they were the most precious things in the world, she couldn't help but smile, despite the pain.

Today was no different.

It was the first day after Hiroaka joined the Literature Club, meaning, they'd be sharing their first poems with the club today. Sayori and Hiroaka chatted amiably with one another on the way, while Sayori herself counted the precious time before Mike took control again. It was the one time their conversations varied, Loop to Loop, and she treasured the little time she could have with her old childhood friend, even if he wasn't really real.

It was the same as every first day. Sayori and Hiroaka bantered back and forth. Yuri gave him her book. Natuski already disappeared into the closet, and as Hiroaka/Mike and Yuri chatted with one another, the familiar clench around her heart was only a dull pain.

It would hurt when he didn't choose her. It would always hurt, but it hurt less when she knew it wasn't her friend who made that choice.

"Sayori, are you okay?" She jumped at the sound of Monika's voice, twisting around to see a concerned expression.

Sayori blinked at the question before smiling brightly, ignoring the bad thoughts trying to cloud her mind. "Of course, I am! Why wouldn't I be?"

Monika had her stern-concerned President face. "Sayori…"

"I'm okay! I'm okay! Really!" She assured, waving her arms in front of her frantically. After looking around to make sure no one else was paying attention, she whispered quietly. "I'm as fine as ever. Just a little...a little…" She trailed off, not able to find the words.

"Do you want to talk about it," Monika whispered back, just as quietly, "I don't mind."

Sayori shook her head. "No, no, no. I'm good. I'm good, not now at least. I want everything to go just as planned today. Don't make this about me."

Monika looked like she was able to disagree, her lips pressing for a second. However, before her mind tried to mock her, Monika sighed softly, the tension from her shoulders falling away. "If that's what you want." At Sayori's rapid nodding, she laughed softly, a small smile on her face. "We'll talk later then. Instead, how about we make plans for the festival?"

The two chatted about festival plans, just in case the Loop didn't end at the start of the festival. It didn't take too long, so their conversation eventually diverted to future plans and different possibilities things could bring, including the different Variants.

"Natsuki will love it if we turn into a cupcake club!"

"Hopefully she'll be Awake by then."

After they finished their musing, Monika gathered everyone together to share their poems. Hiroaka/Mike visited her first, a little nervous at his new poetic writing. She gave her usual encouragements, mentally noting Yuri's style sprinkled in his writing.

As he went off to visit another girl, Sayori, after taking too long to stare at his retreating back, forced her gaze away and went in search for Monika.

She wasn't too hard to find. Instead of interacting with the others, she watched on in front of the room with a peaceful smile. As Sayori approached, her eyes brightened and her smile turned cheerful. "Did everything go well?" She asked, genuine curiosity in her voice.

Sayori nodded. "He liked it! He said it was really me! Like always!" Her smile didn't even feel too strained this time.

If Monika caught her slight distress, she didn't comment. Instead she smiled pleasantly. "I'm glad. Did you write a different poem than usual?"

"Oh no. No." Sayori laughed awkwardly to herself. "I was a little lazy last night and threw something together again."

"The breakfast poem?"

Sayori blushed. "...Maybe."

Monika laughed. "Never change, Sayori." The fondness in her voice managed to scrub away some of the embarrassment.

"Did you write a new poem?" Sayori asked quickly. "If you did, I'd love to read it! I bet it'll be amazing!"

Monika blinked, and for some reason, looked rather awkward. "Yes and no," she admitted, not meeting her gaze. "I wrote a new poem, but I couldn't bring myself to share it with everyone. I settled on bringing an older one instead."

"Well," Sayori mused, "Could you share it with me? If you want to!" She amended quickly, "I would love to read it, but if you're not comfortable-"

"Sure." Monika interrupted Sayori's ramblings. "I was more apprehensive about the contents than anything." Sayori watched in excitement, as Monika sifted through her binder, revealing a perfect piece of paper after a few seconds of searching. Monika took a moment to look over her poem, before handing it to Sayori. "Besides," she added quietly, "I think you'll appreciate it the most."

Despite her excitement, Sayori made sure to take the poem slowly, careful to keep the paper crisp.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she stared at the shape. Monika always liked to play with spacing… but this was something else.

Eternity

How cold it must be

No th o ug ht - safe from your

Own mind lost - - - in the abyss an

Ete rnity alone - - - - - my th ou gh ts

Nowhere to go - - - - - - - - except forward

My he art le ft - - - - - - - - - - - behind far with

Ea ch pa ssing - - - - - - - - - ho ur my heart

All heavy with - - - - - - - the inevitable

Each thought - - - - - more chilling

than ever I - - - move forward

S ee ki ng - redemption

Then

I change - the world

Changes a - - - bit with me

My heartwarms - - - - - the cy cle repeats

Finding paths in - - - - - - - - the endlessness and

Re dem pti on no - - - - - - - - - - longer a lost dream

But pillars of light - - - - - - - - - - - - - Bursting with endless

Pathways yet even - - - - - - - - - - - with a cold brewing

It holds me dear - - - - - and pro mises my

Lost happiness - - - letting go fear

I embrace - the warmth

Eternally

"It's a bit obvious, if you know what you're looking for." Monika said quietly. Sayori looked up, heart clenching at her friend's bright smile. "I wanted to write down how I was feeling. I might have gone overboard with the style, but-"

Sayoro didn't let her finish. Poem safe and sound on the table, Sayori rushed up and held her friend in a tight embrace, holding her as close as she possibly could. For one terrible moment Monika tensed, but she quickly relaxed in her hold.

Sayori didn't know her purpose in this world, if there was even a purpose to have. She woke up, struggled to get out of bed, ate, and pretended everything was okay, every day, for the same days on and on. In the grand scheme of things, she wasn't much, wasn't anything really, and she technically didn't matter.

Yet, as she held her best friend close, Sayori couldn't bring herself to care. She had her purpose here, at the Literature Club Looping with her best friend and hoping for the day their other club members could join them.

And maybe, that was good enough for her.

1.9 – Near Death Experience (by Masterweaver)

Yuri stared at her hands, trying to keep her breathing steady. She could hear Monika, again, welcoming the newcomer to the literature club-another greeting, and a casual... laugh. Still, she didn't look up. She couldn't... she couldn't face him, not after what...

...oh god...

She felt him coming near. Did he remember too? She didn't... no. Just say hello, and walk away. That was what she would do, yes.

She looked up, trying for a confident smile-

-and paled.

No eyes. No mouth, no nose. Hair and ears, yes, but anything that looked like a face... torn away. A white, irregular patch that grew and shrunk as she watched.

"I... uh... hel...hello. I... I'm going to... uh..."

Yuri swallowed.

"I... I'm sorry, I need some air."

Forcing her eyes away from the figure she walked briskly out into the hall. Once the door was shut, she leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, clutching her chest-

-it had felt incredible, it had been so liberating-

-stop. Stop, breathe. Breathe in. And out. It was wrong. She knew it was wrong, she had realized even then she was going crazy. A few scratches, sure, that was fine, but-

"Yuri?"

She blinked, turning her head. Monika was standing, peering at her cautiously.

"Oh. Yes, Monika? Is... do you need me?"

Monika's expression grew wary. "Yuri... I... I'm going to ask you something weird. Please, don't freak out, because I *can* explain, but I need to know the truth."

"Uh... okay."

"Yuri..." The girl wrung her hands. "Do... you remember... dying?"

Yuri's breath hitched for a moment. The words in her mind jumbled, clamoring to escape her throat and collapsing into a few tangled squeaks. Eventually she nodded.

"...Okay." Monika held up her hands. "Like I said. I can explain. But it's a big long and complicated explanation and... and I did some very, very bad things. So if you hate me, I... understand entirely. But... I need to explain everything, which means I need you to stay calm and listen. Can you do that, like you are now?"

Yuri gave another squeak-before clenching her eyes shut and clutching at an arm. "I-I can try. I just... I don't know what came over me back then."

Monika sighed. "I do. And... I'm sorry."

"I mean, it's not your fault," Yuri assured her.

Monika sagged against the wall. "Actually... it is."

The explanation had been long, complex and thorough. Yuri had listened through it all, through Monika's hesitant but continuing explanation of the multiverse, their world, and her own role in Yuri's madness. For a time, as Yuri contemplated, there was silence.

"...Okay."

Monika took a moment to process that. "...so?"

"So, okay." Yuri shrugged. "That all makes sense."

"...You're not freaking out?" Monika asked. "The world being broken or, or being an dating sim character or... me manipulating you?"

"Do you... want me to freak out?"

"Oh, no, nonono I'm... just a little disturbed. That you're taking this so calmly. After whatever just happened in there."

Yuri shrugged again. "I mean... I can see how it's all supposed to be scary. My whole reality limited to this, trapped for infinite repetition, one of my constant companions being an ambiguous and literally faceless boy, and another being the love-crazed reality warper who mind-raped me."

Monika flinched.

"But... to be honest, it answers so many questions about... about who I am, about what I do. And it's actually kind of exciting." She paused. "And... I know this probably is a lit-tle creepy, but... even when I knew what was going on with me was wrong, that I was going too far and couldn't stop myself, the sensation of finally cutting loose and enjoying it all was just so amazing to experience."

"...Stabbing yourself in the chest was amazing to experience."

"I know, I know, I'm... weird." Yuri smiled faintly. "It's just... the feeling, of life dripping down my pristine flesh-"

"OOOOOOOOOOOKAY yeah, I get that we're all screwed up and I have no room to point fingers but, Yuri, that is really disturbing."

Yurl pulled a lock of hair over her eyes. "Sorry, sorry. I... I'll be quiet."

"...No," Monika replied with a sigh, "I'm sorry. That is a part of you. I might have cranked it up to extreme levels, but... I can't get rid of that, I can only work with what already exists. And since we're going to be stuck together, I'll have to figure out how to accept it." She took a breath. "So, yes, talk about it, and... I guess I'll let you know when you're going too far?"

"...Are you sure? I mean, if I'm making you uncomfortable-"

"Yuri, look. Sayori has serious depression. Natsuki is very nervous about being abused. I'm... well, I don't know what flavor of crazy I was, exactly, but it was a pretty intense flavor. You know what you like and, while I don't agree with it, I can see that you're aware of the

issues. Hell, now that I think about it, you were the only one ever seriously aware of their own problems in baseline. So... yeah. I'm a little uncomfortable, and I will tell you when you're going too far, but I... don't want you to repress yourself and hide away." Monika paused. "Although as soon as we can, I think we all need some serious fucking therapy."

"Oh, absolutely agreed." Yuri nodded, before blushing. "So... hey, after club is over today, do you want to see my, um... my knife collection?"

"...I am going to be the supportive friend and say yes even though part of me is worried you're going to use them."

"Oh, no, I won't, it's just, you know, I've named them and all."

Monika nodded. "Of course you have."

1.10 – Doki Doki 3 Confirmed (by Awesomedude17)

(DDLC)/(Half-Life)

Japan. Set up for dating sim. Sounds like fun.

Still, if this is like that School Days Branch where my dad was a fucking creep who deserves to be castrated, I'm totally going to shoot myself. I don't want a repeat of that time that lady smashed her head on the pavement. Personal experience has led me to believe that dying is preferable to whatever crap happens after that.

Hell, if there's a smart type there, I could quiz her on Quantum Field Theory... or maybe not. That shit is too advanced for high schoolers. That's more of an MIT field of study.

Gordon eventually found himself in the literature club that held four students.

"Welcome to the literature club, Gordon." Monika said.

"Pleased to be welcomed."

Several days later.

"Seriously, where the hell is Sayori? She completely slept in. I'm going to get her out of bed. If she thinks she can just hang around in her house, than she could have the decency to ask me to join her. She's dealing with depression, and I'm dealing with PTSD from Black Mesa, plus all of those tongue things. I'm sure she'd appreciate the weed I brought her. She's probably going to be tense."

Gordon opened the door, found Sayori, screamed like any sane person would do upon finding a dead person hanging from a noose, Unpocketed a gun, and put it to his head.

"I knew it! I fucking knew it! This place sucks! I'm out of here!"

Bang

1.11 – Faulty Argument (by Keluvax)

Now, although Monika was the Anchor, she hadn't always been able to Awake before she starting screwing with things. And given that she was now trying to be a good person, as well as the fact that Jenny had straight up warned her not to make such major changes, the club president was beyond remiss. Sometimes, when looking back on those memories, she felt like she was watching someone else. This was not her. Not anymore. But still, it served as a grim reminder of what she was.

And every Loop this happened, she remembered what she'd rather forget.

What made it worse was that after having a quick discussion with the Looper again, they had determined that if Monika had already made changes by the time she Awoke, it would be safer to continue with the alterations and keep things as close to Baseline as possible. It hurt her every time this happened. It hurt her every time she had to

manipulate her friends into wretched husks, even if she knew that they wouldn't remember it. Sayori would remember, but in Baseline she wouldn't be able to bear the brunt of the instability... except, perhaps, on the occasion she was Unawake after gaining the club-president position. And Yuri? It was complicated.

Natsuki, on the other hand? She knew she didn't really feel pain in her current state, and Monika was terrified at the thought of her realizing what was happening to her.

And it didn't take long for that nightmare to become a reality.

She watched the two as they argued over in the corner. Normally the Anchor didn't bother to look, seeing as she knew every word of that fight by heart, but something felt... off, and she decided to keep an eye on it.

"If I were that full of myself..." Yuri stood up, her words laced with poison, "...I would deliberately go out of my way to make everything I do overly cutesy!"

Natsuki's hands curled into fists. It was just like this fancy-pants student to assume that her style was meant to be attention-grabbing! Her poems had very important things to say, and the simple writing was to make sure that the meaning couldn't be misinterpreted! The youngest club member wanted to say something along those lines, but her mouth acted for her, reaching for the most deliberately aggravating thing she could think of: "Well, I wasn't the one whose boobs magically grew a size bigger the day Hiroaka started coming to school!"

"N-Natsuki!"

"Um, Natsuki." Monika peeked in, with that same old robotic pose she always had. ...Why did she even think about that? She never thought the brunette looked this stiff before. "Isn't that a little-"

Regardless of her current thoughts, Natsuki turned to face the club-president in sync with her classmate. "THIS DOESN'T INVOLVE YOU!" They shouted in unison. Monika appeared neither startled nor upset, instead sighing and walking to the other side of the classroom to watch. For the moment, the pigtailed girl thought that the reaction was suspicious, like it wasn't in the leader's personality to react like that. She wanted to dwell on it further, but not three seconds later and Yuri had already brought the argument back into full force.

"Taking out your own insecurities out on others like that... You really-"

"-Act as young as I look? Is that it?" Even the hothead was surprised by her own words. Why did she say that?

Yuri grabbed tightly onto her hair, startled. "Y-yes, that's exactly it!"

How did she know what Yuri was about to say?

And why was Monika looking at her like that?

The lavender-haired student grit her teeth and groaned. "You think you're clever, don't you?"

Natsuki stood on her toes, trying to stare at her face-to-face. "Yes, I do!" ...But why did everything feel wrong?

"So you guess what I'm saying one time. Congratulations!" Yuri started fake-clapping. "This teacher is going to give you a gold star!"

"Y-you're not even a teacher! Besides, I don't want your stupid gold star!"

"You should take it anyway- maybe you'll finally impress your father for once?"

Natsuki's breath caught in her chest as memories flashed before her. Memories she'd rather forget. And memories that couldn't be hers. Memories of things that hadn't happened yet; she knew how this

argument went, and while the end result of that wasn't pretty, she would rather go through that then this.

But being overwhelmed with emotion, she couldn't redirect the argument. "What if I don't want to impress him?" she blurted, tears threatening to roll down her face.

"Oh, is little Natsuki crying?" Yuri put her hand underneath the tsundere's chin and forcing her to look up at her. "Don't you know it's rude to cry in public? Maybe I should send you home early so your father can spank his little baby back into shape!"

"You... y-you..." Natsuki couldn't take it anymore. Anger, fear, sadness, all of it bubbled over. She burst into tears, with wracking sobs blocking her vision as she ran out of the room.

Monika, too, was on the verge of tears as she watched the situation play out and end before her; even in Baseline, Yuri wasn't this harsh. Maybe she had tampered with her a little too much? She knew she didn't really have any control over her actions while Unawake, but she couldn't help but feel guilty about it. She made her cry, even if it was indirectly. And if her suspicions were correct, that argument was the first thing Natsuki would permanently remember.

The Anchor gently pushed open the door and peeked into the hallway. Natsuki was curled up into a fetal position, sobbing loudly in front of the door to what would've been another club had more been programmed. The club leader slowly approached her, and when she didn't object or tell her to buzz off, she sat down next to her and wrapped an arm around her.

"...Um... Natsuki?" Monika had no clue how to go about this- Natsuki was in a fragile state, and as the club president already proved, the Anchor was terrible at resolving conflicts. Sayori was way better at this, but she wasn't here. It would be too risky to bring her back right now.

"What do you want, Monika?" She choked, not bothering to glance up at her comforter.

"I... came to tell you not to blame Yuri. Trust me when I tell you those words weren't her own."

Natsuki stopped crying just long enough to glare at her. "Then whose words were they?"

"They were... mine."

"...What?"

The Anchor took a deep breath. This was going to be complicated. "Before I explain... I need to ask you something. Do you remember that argument ending differently?"

"...How did you- uh, yes, but why is that important?"

"Because it'll put everything I say into context. Now let me explain."

Monika talked about the Loops. She talked about Yggdrasil. She talked about Jenny Everywhere. She talked about the fact that she was the Anchor of this world. She talked about the other girls, and about how they sometimes knew they were Looping too. Most importantly, she talked about why Yuri was acting so harsh.

Natsuki didn't say anything for the longest time, but eventually words passed through her trembling lips. "Go away. I... have a lot to think about."

Compiler's Commentary:

1.1: Welcome to Your New Reality, Monika.

1.2: I've heard of stir-craziness leading to shooting sprees, but this is just ridiculous.

1.3: Welcome to the *Looping* Literature Club, Sayori.

1.4: You think this is bad, Monika? Try trading Pokemon.

1.5: This is why you should finish your games, people.

1.6: In which we discuss Purpose, and what to do without one.

1.7: First Contact has been established.

1.8: Life sucks, and eternity is , living eternally sucks infinitely. But friends can make life suck less. Ergo, eternal friends can make life suck infinitely less.

1.9: Nice of you to join us, Yuri! Just…please try not to scare the children, kay?

1.10: Gordon Freeman, expert in the field of nuclear overreactions!

1.11: …someone give Natsuki a hug, please.

Chapter 2

2.1 – Emergency Group Meeting (by Masterweaver)

Monika, Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki all sat at the table.

"...Okay, everyone! We're all Awake." The red-headed Anchor clasped her hands together. "For the first time, even! So... this is a big thing. Does... anybody want to do anything? As a group?"

"We could talk about how much of a monster you are," Natsuki replied coldly.

Monika winced.

"Natsuki!" Sayori gave a disapproving look. "I understand that you're upset about what happened in baseline, but-"

"How can you defend her?!" Natsuki shouted. "You *died* because of her! *Yuri* died because of her! I walked in on Hiroaka staring at her corpse and, and I lost both my friends and I couldn't even remember you Sayori and I-my dad, he-the things he did to me, it was all because of her code-mangling!"

The redhead sunk into her chair a bit. "I *am* sorry for all that... and I know I was wrong..."

"Well, you know what, sorry doesn't cut it," Natsuki spat.

"Natsuki." Yuri held her hand gently. "None of us are saying that what she did was right. We all know she has a long way to go before she can... before we can be comfortable around her again, even if we do consider her our friend. But the thing is, all we have is each other. So we have to make this work."

"...I know that," Natsuki admitted reluctantly. "It's just... after what she put us through... now she's the one responsible for our world? Now

we have to trust her? How is that fair?"

"It isn't." Monika looked down at her hands. "It isn't fair. It should be somebody who... who earned this, or deserves it, but... you're right. These two died, and you... well..."

Natsuki glowered at her.

"...The thing is, being the Anchor isn't about being the good guy, or the most powerful, or even technically sane. It's about being mentally stable. And... out of the four of us, two have serious mental issues that led to suicide, and you... well, I had the code and you didn't, in baseline, which meant that yes. You were my plaything. Terrible things could happen to you without your input, you had far too little control of your life to be... stable."

"So the monster became the queen."

"And the queen realized her people's suffering."

"Really." Natsuki crossed her arms. "What are you going to do about that, then?"

Monika steeled herself. "First and foremost, apologize wholeheartedly. What I did was wrong, and horrific, and I deserve your ire-all of it. Secondly, I swear... I swear to only touch the code again if I have the explicit permission of everyone who is Awake. I want to deal with you as people, not as puppets. And..."

She glanced to the corner, where a blank-faced boy sat.

"...I still love him. But I don't think it's a real love. I think... I think it's some sort of parasite, a hard-coded glitch, latched onto my soul that I can't get rid of. And... I know he's not real, not really. I know that the player, whoever they are, will have a life outside us. So... I'm not going to pursue him."

Natsuki quirked a brow. "So he's open for the rest of us."

Sayori shook her head. "I do care for him, but it's like Monika's love- it's a memory, an outline, something I don't find impacts me. And..." She rubbed her hands together. "Well... I want everyone to be happy, not just me."

Monika frowned at her. "Sayori..."

"Yes, yes, I know, self-care, I am important too. All I'm saying is... I think I've moved beyond him."

Yuri nodded. "That's good, that's very good. As for me... well... I just wanted to be accepted. That's all he had on me, accepting me. Having... having you all know who I really am... and letting me be that... I don't have any interest in him anymore."

Monika bit her lip. "You... you're taking care to-"

"Yes, I am. I'm being careful, don't worry."

Natsuki looked over to the blank-faced boy. "So, if I want him, he's there."

Monika nodded. "If you want him, he's right there."

"...I'm not in the mood. Not for romance." She shook her head, turning back. "Not right now."

"Okay. So... what *are* you in the mood for?"

"...Cupcakes. I know it's a little silly, but-"

"Why don't we all try baking cupcakes?" Sayori suggested. "Since we're all awake and all."

"Do any of us know how to bake?" Monika asked. "Besides Natsuki, I mean?"

Yuri rose her hand. "I do."

There was an awkward pause.

Monika turned to her. "Do you bake with-?"

"No no no. My collection is kept separate from my cooking utensils."

"...alright. Yuri, teach us how to bake." Monika glanced at Natsuki. "If that's... alright with everyone."

After a moment, she sighed. "Fine. But I'm still keeping my eye on you!"

2.2 – Hanging in the Balance (by Awesomedude17)

(DDLC)/(Ace Attorney)

Monika Awoke to see Natsuki and Yuri looking concerned. After looking into her Loop Memories, she suddenly realized what had happened.

Sayori...

"Huh, guess you're Awake now." Natsuki noted.

"Isn't this the point where Sayori..." Yuri trailed off.

"Yes," tears flowed down Monika's face. "It is. Sayori should be-"

Bzzz *Bzzz*

Monika fumbled for her phone and picked up.

"Hello?"

"Come to the hospital, now."

"What?" Monika blurted out as the caller hung up.

Additionally, she then began to notice that the character was not named after the usual choices, but rather was named Jin Yugami. A full name was rare in of itself.

This had to have been a Fused Loop.

The sterile environment was relatively slow compared to what was expected in emergency services, not that anyone in the club cared.

Eventually, they were led to a single room, where they saw her.

"Sayori!" The three ran up to her. Monika took a peek at her neck.

Bruised.

With a pang of guilt, Monika looked Sayori in the eyes.

"I'm fine... just a bit Loopy." Sayori said with a strained smile.

"Oh thank goodness you're okay." Monika cried out. "How'd you survive that?"

"How about you let me explain."

The three turned to see a person, back turned to them.

Yes, the Loop Memories came.

"Jin... you saved Sayori?" Yuri asked.

"..." Jin turned his head to the group, grin on his face; a real, noticeable face.

"He did..." Sayori said.

"Indeed." Jin turned to the group, his expression turning neutral.

"He said he's a Looper, girls."

"Really?" Natsuki looked over him.

"Is it any surprise? As for her, I merely did my duty as a friend, cutting her down from her noose." Jin turned his head to the side.

"...You are nicer than you look."

"So, what happened?" Yuri asked.

"I suppose I'll explain."

Jin had begun to notice something was off. Sayori was usually up late, but not this late. Deciding to forgo school and the literature club, he entered her house and looked around for her.

Upon entering her room, he widened his eyes in shock.

Sayori was trying to fight off the noose around her neck. Blood was already drawn from her hands. At this rate, she'd be dead within seconds.

No time. *Jin made a peculiar motion, as if slicing something and within moments, the noose was cut down. Sayori fell down, coughing and wheezing as the pressure on her throat was suddenly relieved.*

Quickly finding a phone, Jin called an ambulance, right before coming back to Sayori, now crying her eyes out.

"Hold on, how'd you cut the noose?" Yuri asked the obvious.

Jin promptly demonstrated on a vase of flowers by Sayori's bed, cutting one of flowers' head off.

"Whoa..." Yuri muttered as she began to blush.

"...Baseline." Jin plainly said.

"Okay, clearly, you're not from around here. Who are you, really?" Natsuki pressed Jin.

"... Very well. Explanations are in order, I suppose." Jin smirked. "As of now, and whenever I am in Japan, the name you know is my true name, but in other instances, I am known as Simon Blackquill. In my world, I am a prosecutor, known for psychologically manipulating witnesses, defendants and judges alike."

Monika blinked and decided to look into his coding.

It was massive. The words were not only true, but there was a massive amount of information about his character.

In her haze, she didn't notice Blackquill open the window to let a hawk in, which promptly attacked Monika.

"AH! Getawaygetaway!"

With a calling whistle, the hawk landed on Blackquill's arm.

"Perhaps it'd be wiser to ask for what you want to hear rather than cheat for it."

Monika glared at Blackquill, who she swore had an amused face.

"That's not cool, Simon." Natsuki spat at the visiting Looper.

"Uuuuh... Yeah! Don't... attack... uhhh..."

"It's okay, girls... I deserve it."

"Humph," Blackquill closed his eyes. "Do you know the basics of Looping yet?"

"Subspace Pocket. General terms. Yggdrasil." Monika listed off. "Only Yuri had a reason to use it so far."

"I see. I suppose I'll keep you four in mind. In the meantime, I'll take my leave. Once Sayori is out of the hospital, I'll treat you all to soba. Nothing says anything about the heart like a hot bowl of buckwheat noodles."

The club looked at each other, glances every which where. They soon nodded together.

"Soba sounds nice." Sayori said.

"Good. I'll see you all later. Goodbye." Blackquill left the room.

"What a real piece of work, that guy." Natsuki said.

"How'd he catch on to what I was doing?" Monika asked, somewhat worried.

"Maybe he noticed a tell, or something. What do you think, Yuri?" Sayori looked at Yuri.

"I think he's amazing..." Yuri said breathlessly.

"What'd you say?" Natsuki inquired.

"Nothing!" Yuri said quickly, blushing profusely.

Monika groaned and facepalmed.

Oh joy, Yuri is totally crushing on Blackquill.

2.3 – Dress Up (by Masterweaver)

"Everyone needs to relax once in a while," Sayori stated. "Therefore, I decree today is... CASUAL FRIDAY!" In the blink of an eye, she was in short jeans and a pink blouse.

Natsuki shrugged. "Sure, whatever." A white shirt and pink-ruffled skirt graced her form. "You know, as much as I hate being a coded series of pictures, it does make changing a snap."

Yuri was already in her black pants and sweater. "We're more than just a code and images, Natsuki."

"Yes, we have a soul and all that. I just mean that we're human-shaped shells, in a physical sense. We don't have the usual things, like a need to physically change our clothes, or any organs or innards-"

"I have plenty of innards."

Monika gave her a pained smile. "Yes, Yuri, we all know, you don't need to show us."

Yuri rubbed a few locks of her hair through her fingers. "Right. Insides stay inside."

Sayori nodded gently. "That is a good rule."

The girl blushed a bit, looking around nervously. "Ah... Monika? Why haven't you changed?"

"Well, Yuri, you see, I don't... actually have any casual clothes." Monika chuckled awkwardly. "Sorry if I'm ruining casual Friday..."

Natsuki smirked. "What do you know, you can screw things up even when you're doing nothing."

Sayori cleared her throat, glaring at her.

"What?" Natsuki crossed her arms. "Just saying."

"...Well, this shall not do at all. Ladies, we must conspire to design Monika some casual wear!"

Yuri beamed. "That sounds incredible! She would look good in a sarashi, I think-"

Monika blinked. "A... this isn't an anime, Yuri!"

"It is animeesque though," Natsuki pointed out. "But yeah, wrapping bandages around your chest is more your thing, Yuri."

Yuri nodded. "True, true. Maybe start with an ordinary tee-shirt-"

"It could be one of those ones with a word printed on it! Like 'Trash' or 'Cute but Psycho!'"

"Or," Sayori over-rode, "it could just have a symbol on it. Like... a broken heart...? No, that's terrible."

Monika rubbed the back of her head. "I'm... fine wearing the uniform, really-"

The three girls gave her pointed looks.

"-buuuuuuut if you want to design me something... I, uh... I've never worn pants?"

2.4 – Tatsuki (by EastwindOfAzarath and Masterweaver)

"Soooo, how are you doing today...'Tatsuki'?" Sayori couldn't contain her laughter after actually saying Natsuki's "nickname" this loop and promptly fell to the floor and was actually rolling around.

Natsuki, on the other hand, was just glad that it was a cold day so that she could actually cover up the tattoos that were not only on most of her body, but went all the way up to her neck and even the backs of her hands, with a scarf and gloves and not be **completely** obvious. The pink haired girl in question just rolled her eyes and and went to her manga collection in the back. she picked out a volume at random and muttered, "Well, at least i know she's awake... stupid tree and its freaking wordplay. i dread what it comes up with next... oh boy, i have a bad feeling."

Yuri sidled closer, fidgeting a bit. She leaned down, her cheeks pink.

"...Did... did they... *hurt?"*

Natsuki blinked, looking up at the unawake girl.

"...Yuri, just... no."

2.5 – Catsuki (by EastwindOfAzarath)

'Well, at least this is a cute look' thought the pink haired neko girl whom had Awakened just a few moments prior, as she walked into the familiar club-room. "Catsuki", however, found not just her manga collection in the closet, but also a mess of pillows and blankets that had been haphazardly shaped into a "bed" of sorts. she also noticed the cat toy on the shelf. she bit her tongue just a tad before letting out a sigh, "I'm not even mad, that looks comfy as hell."

"You know Sayori, I'm kind of surprised at you," Natsuki spoke to the girl that was currently co-occupying her 'cat-bed'. The bow-haired girl in question looked up from playing with the cat toy that had been laying on the shelf. "I thought you had at least *some* restraint."

2.6 – Mangone (by Keluvax)

To Natsuki, the school was one of the few places she felt comfortable reading manga; it was a place where she didn't feel judged. Sure, there were... other problems with the school, but seeing as she was Looping, she could push those issues off to the side for now as she worked on getting used to things.

Her collection was in the closet, and it was a fairly sizable one. Little booklets of adventure were all aligned neatly into boxes, like always, but unlike last time, the set was situated atop the highest shelf. The tsundere huffed and crossed her arms. She always told the girls not to put her collection up there, but for some inexplicable reason, every time she checked, it was there. Whether this was just how this universe worked or the result of a multiple-Loop prank, she was not amused.

And just like always, her attempts to get it down resulted in the series of paperbacks toppling all over her head and across the floor. She stared down at the mess scattered around her feet for the umpteenth time with annoyed ambivalence. With this having happened so many times, she couldn't even find the motivation to get angry; it was just going to get put back up there anyway.

So with a sigh, she dragged the box over into the center of the pile and started sorting her manga again. She figured it would be easier to find Parfait Girls while she was arranging things. But for some reason, she couldn't find it- not even when she examined her collection for the third time.

Now she had a reason to be angry. "Monika!" She shouted, standing up. "Get over here!"

The club president arrived, looking just as unamused as Natsuki. "What happened?"

"Don't 'what happened' me! I know you're involved with this somehow!" The pink-haired girl put her hands on her hips and glared at her.

"Seriously, Natty, I have no clue what happened here."

"So you're saying you weren't the one that stole Parfait Girls from me?"

"Oh, is that what happened? I'm telling you I had nothing to do with this... and you don't believe me, do you?"

"Not a bit."

"Look, I can just go back into the code and put it back there. But really, aren't you getting tired of reading that every Loop?"

Natsuki wanted to say something, but after a few moments of reflection, she realized that she was indeed growing tired of the Parfait Girls. Oh, how she hated it when Monika was right.

"F-fine!" She said, glancing away from the Anchor. "Leave it like that- see if I care."

"Alright, alright." The brunette began to back away with a faint smile on her face. "But really, try and see if there's anything else in there you like."

With a groan, the tsundere resumed rifling through her collection. Nothing really caught her eye until somewhere near the end of her search, where she pulled out a series she was aware she didn't have normally.

"Jojo's Bizarre Adventure," she read aloud. "Why not?" And so she sat down and started to read.

2.7 – File Jumper (by Masterweaver)

"Okay everyone-!"

"Do you have to say that every loop?" Natsuki deadpanned.

Monika took a slow breath. "Yes. Yes I do." She paused. "So, as I was saying, we're all Awake again."

Sayori smiled. "I like it when that happens. It's always so good to see everyone."

Natsuki opened her mouth, paused, and sighed. "Yeah, it's... good to see you too, Sayori."

"This does happen a lot for us," Yuri mused. "I mean, I know Monika's always Awake, being our Anchor and all, but if what Jenny says is right she should... be alone for a hundred or so loops at a time? And even the rest of us should have her and nobody else for most of the time."

Monika shrugged. "Chalk it up to our world being heavily damaged? I don't know, I'll ask Jenny to ask the Admins once she logs in. So, first order of business... do we want to do anything with Hiroaka this loop?"

They all turned and stared at the faceless boy standing in the corner.

"...If he starts moving, I guess." Natsuki sighed, turning away. "Honestly, at this point... I kind of think he's more the club pet than anything."

"And here I thought you wanted to keep things G-rated," Sayori murmured.

"No, I'm serious! We like it when he likes us but all he does is tricks and comfort people, he-"

"As soon as we have a fused loop where it's possible," Monika decreed, "I am going to have somebody analyze him to see if he has a soul or a spark or... whatever. So... yes, if nobody wants to do anything with him, I guess we'll just make sure he... doesn't die..."

Natsuki waved a hand toward her. "I rest my case."

The green-eyed girl gave her a flat look. "Anyway. Second order of business, what shall we do this loop?"

Yuri rose her hand. "I'd... like to put forth an option which I know is going to be a bit... contentious."

Monika nodded.

"...What if... we tried something new? Instead of being dating sim characters, we could be... racing game characters, or maybe some sort of outright visual novel-"

"You're talking about altering the code," Natsuki said flatly.

"...Maybe. Assuming we can't just jump programs."

Monika shook her head. "I've been warned about the dangers of code alteration, especially in the loops. And we all know what happened when..." She winced. "Well. The point is, I am not comfortable creating a new paradigm with the code at this time. That said... I could see if I could move our character files to another program. If everyone is okay with that."

"A change of pace couldn't hurt," Sayori mused.

"You should definitely check with Jenny first," Natsuki insisted. "I want to stretch my legs, same as the rest of you, but... this could be dangerous. Especially if we wind up in Deathkiller 9000."

"I wouldn't do that to you!" Monika assured her.

"I wouldn't mind," Yuri murmured. "Well, maybe a little. It can be hard to wash gore out of hair."

"...I am not going to ask how you know that," Natsuki declared.

"So, check with Jenny to see if we can jump files," Monika interjected, "and then see what's available for us to explore? That's alright with everyone, is it?"

The other girls nodded.

"Alright. I'll be right back." Monika vanished.

2.8 – Flash Game (by Masterweaver)

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Monika rushed into the room, eyes wild. "What's going-YURI OH MY GOD WHAT HAPPENED?!"

"I TOOK OFF MY SHIRT!"

There was dead silence for a moment.

"You... took off your shirt." Monika stared. "That's all you did?"

"YES THAT'S ALL I DID!"

"I-wait. Wait." The redhead groaned, dragging her hand down her face. "Oh no. I... think... I know what's going on."

"IS THIS ANOTHER ONE OF YOUR MAD EXPERIMENTS?" Natsuki demanded.

"Okay, one, I don't do mad experiments. Two, we're dating sim characters with limited sprites. There's no data for what we look like under our clothes."

Natsuki opened her mouth, paused, and facepalmed. "So the reason Yuri's got no body is because she never had a body."

"Nope."

"Well... huh."

"Why'd you take off your shirt anyway?" Monika asked the tall girl.

"Uh, well. Me and... me and Natsuki were kind of... arguing about, you know, if we were a dating sim or a full-fledged H-game, and, uh... I..." Yuri blushed, her hands (the only part of her arms they could see) reaching up. "I thought I'd-Oh! Oh, uh..."

Natsuki blinked. "Are you... are you groping yourself?"

"N-no! I'm just, you know, surprised. That they're still there. I mean, if there's no data for how they look like, there shouldn't be data for where they are. Or... how they feel..."

There was another pause.

"So you thought, to prove we were an H-game, you'd flash Natsuki."

"Yes, Monika."

"And you freaked out when you found you had nothing to flash with."

"...Yes Monika."

"Okay." Monika took a breath. "First, put your shirt back on."

"Um. It... disappeared."

"Go through the motions."

Yuri blinked. Slowly, she brought her hands over her head, gripped at thin air, and pulled down. In but a few moments her sweater was back.

"Secondly... I don't know, don't ever do that again."

2.9 – Cultural Differences (by Awesomedude17)

"I just realized something." Sayori suddenly said.

"What?" Yuri blinked.

"If we're stuck in the same week over and over, we can't celebrate anymore holidays."

Everyone looked contemplative.

"Well, considering what issues we have, I doubt we have much reason to celebrate." Monika said.

"Yes but... no more holidays to celebrate. We can't even get KFC for Christmas anymore!"

"Hoo boy. I'm glad that player isn't here. I'm sure they'd be confused about that."

"Why would they?"

"It's a cultural difference thing."

"I'm not even going to ask how much you know about this visual novel we're stuck in, or whatever is out there in the real world." Natsuki remarked.

"Probably for the best." Yuri said.

2.10 – What Even is This? (by Awesomedude17)

(DDLC)/(Undertale)

"GREETINGS, MY VIEWERS! IT IS I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WITH ALPHYS AND SANS TO PLAY THIS GAME EVERYONE HAS BEEN RECOMMENDING TO ME, DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB! FOR SOME REASON, IT'S LABELED AS HORROR, BUT I SEE PAST THE JOKE! THIS IS HARMLESS!"

"sure looks like it, though I'm going to assume it's not a trick"

"HMM, SAY WHAT YOU WILL SANS, BUT THIS HAS NO REPUTATION!"

"Ahehehe..." Alphys chuckled, suddenly having a bad feeling about this.

"SO, LET US START! OKAY, CONTENT WARNING. THEY SURE ARE PUSHING FOR THIS JOKE."

Sans looked at the camera, not sure what exactly to think except that maybe this is not what it seems.

"WAAAAAAAAAAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAA! WAAAAAAAAAA! I CANNOT BELIEVE JUST HOW SADDENING THIS REVELATION ABOUT SAYORI IS!"

"y'know, i am kinda glad I connected with her"

"I can kinda relate with her." Alphys said, suddenly kinda sad.

"I WILL ACCEPT HER LOVE TO MAKE HER HAPPY! SHE DESERVES TO BE HAPPY!"

"yep"

"WAKE UP DUMMY. I SLOWLY OPEN THE DOOR. I THINK SHE'S..."

"..."

"WELP! **TIME TO DELETE THIS GAME!** "

"Yes!"

"dear god why?"

"OKAY, MY VIEWERS, I APOLOGIZE FOR MY ACTIONS BUT THIS IS NOT SOMETHING I WOULD LIKE TO DEAL WITH. GOODBYE!"

"oh, I just googled the song. it's called sayo-nara."

"EVEN IN THIS GAME, I AM SURROUNDED BY PUNS! TERRIBLE PUNS!"

2.11 – Hypocrites (by strangedementia)

[DDLC/Analogue: A Hate Story (not looping)]

Monika sighed. They had been arguing for hours.

Monika had been surprised when she Woke Up in space, her starship parked alongside the wreck of a Korean colonization ship, the Mugunghwa, so that, as an independant investigator more or less hired by the Saeju Colony Historical Society, Monika could look through the ship's logs to find out how the Mugunghwa ended up lifeless and drifting in space.

Monika mostly relied on her loop memories for this as well as a couple of AIs: an Awake *Yuri whose loop memories told her that she

had killed the entire population of the ship centuries ago, and an Unawake *Natsuki who believed wholeheartedly in the horrifically regressive and misogynistic society that the Mugunghwa ended up becoming.

As expected, they did not get along.

At all.

"That is one of the most ridiculous things that I ever heard!"

"Why? Because I'm a woman?!"

"YES! What point is there in teaching women how to read?! Women are naturally less intelligent then men. That is a fact of life!"

Monika resolved never to tell Natsuki about this.

"You hypocrite! You realize that YOU are a woman, right?! How can you even think those things?!"

Monika would have intervened, but a glitch in the Mugunghwa's systems made her unable to even talk to the AIs without multiple choice answers. They had been like this ever since Monika had downloaded them into her ship's computer along with the Mugunghwa's logs. They had been doing so for a day into the return voyage now and they showed no signs of stopping.

'Sayori,' Monika thought with both hands on her face, 'I wish you were here'

Compiler's Commentary:

2.1: The gang's all here! (Shoots confetti everywhere.)

2.2: Yuri, quit drooling.

2.3: If only every day could be Casual Friday, am I right?

2.4: The beginning of Natsuki's long-suffering relationship with…Pun Loops.

2.5: Catnyaps are nyo joking meowtter, you kneow.

2.6: Screw it, just insert all the JoJo's memes here. There's no way roundabout it…I'll see myself out now.

2.7: Deathkiller 8000 was better, anyways. 9K had no balance.

2.8: But Monika, experimentation is imperative to empirical science!

2.9: Don't be silly, Sayori, you can fit plenty of holidays into a week. (Just Another) Manic Monday, Taco Tuesday, Wacky Wednesday, Throwback Thursday, Freaky Friday, Sassy Saturday, and, of course, Slack-Off Sunday! (That last one's my favorite.)

2.10: Here, have all these cute kitten pictures. They helped me get over it, and I happen to know that friendly skeletons love kittens.

2.11: Something something stagnating air something something common foreshadowing…

Chapter 3

3.1 – SCP (by Awesomedude17)

(DDLC)/(SCP Foundation)

Item #: SCP-8888-579

Object Class: Safe

Containment Procedures: The SCP is to be contained in a computer with the minimum specifications for running.

Windows 7 on PC. OS X 10.9 for Mac OS

1.8GHz Dual-Core CPU

350 MBs of storage

The computer must not contain any other programs beyond default programs.

Description: SCP-8888-579 is a visual novel game called Doki Doki Literature Club made by Team Salvato. The game is largely typical dating simulator that changes into a psychological horror approximately three hours into the game, around which the game increasingly becomes more glitchy. This is normal operation and is not unusual. The game itself, however contains one instance of SCP-8888-A and three instances of SCP-8888-L.

SCP-8888-A, to be referred to as SCP-8888-A-579, is the in-game character, Monika. SCP-8888-A-579's abilities largely depend on whether they're Awake or not. When Awake, subject shows near endless capabilities regarding the control of the computer they're in and can directly communicate via word processors such as Microsoft Word, Google Docs (offline only for safety reasons) and built in text

editors. As a result, extreme caution is required when communicating with SCP-8888-A-579.

The three instances of SCP-8888-L are the remaining characters within the game; SCP-8888-L-6810 (Sayori), SCP-8888-L-6811 (Yuri), and SCP-8888-L-6812 (Natsuki). Unlike SCP-8888-A-579, the subjects are unable to perform any actions beyond in game actions though they are able to communicate normally and can directly address the operator of the program once aware of discussion, albeit requiring SCP-8888-A-579 to relay information to them. This is subject to change as the inevitable changes come via the effects of SCP-8888.

Interview-8888-[redacted]:

Dr. Glass is seated in front of a computer with slightly higher specifications on a Dell brand laptop. Dr. Glass has been instructed to repeat the dialogue spoken by SCP-8888-A-579 to Foundation personnel. Live designation to SCP-8888-A-579 as well as to the three instances of SCP-8888-L has been performed during said interview.

Dr. Glass: Hello?

SCP-8888-A-579: Is that you, Jenny?

Dr. Glass: No. I am Dr. Simon Glass. I presume you are Awake?

SCP-8888-A-579: Yes. Why?

Dr. Glass: I only wish to speak with you. Are the others Awake?

SCP-8888-A-579: Yes. Why do you care?

Dr. Glass: Well, it's because you are currently contained within Site- of the SCP Foundation.

SCP-8888-A-579: SCP?

Dr. Glass: Secure. Contain. Protect. As you are a Looper, we will need to ask a few things regarding yourself. Is this okay with you?

SCP-8888-A-579: Okay, but I'm actually an Anchor.

Dr. Glass: Ah. We can skip the first question then. Now then, how many iterations have you been through so far, excluding this current one?

SCP-8888-A-579: 218.

Dr. Glass: A young Anchor. Still have a way to go. Now, how did you learn of Yggdrasil?

SCP-8888-A-579: Jenny Everywhere.

Note: SCP-8888-A-579 is referring to SCP-8888-L- , known as a Traveling Looper to most.

Dr. Glass: Interesting. Have you had any other contact with other Loopers? Other Branches besides my own?

SCP-8888-A-579: Aside from Simon Blackquill visiting and saving Sayori, no.

Dr. Glass makes no response.

SCP-8888-A-579: Are you still there?

Dr. Glass: I am.

Dr. Glass is relayed the new SCP designations. After nodding, Dr. Glass returns to his interview.

SCP-8888-A-579: Good. Why the pause?

Dr. Glass: Because I now have all the information I need. Thank you, SCP-8888-A-579.

SCP-8888-A-579: What did you call me just now?

The game began to glitch as the in game characters portraits changed to the closest approximation of displeasure possible. The wallpaper for the screen turns blood red.

Dr. Glass: It's standard procedure to assign designation numbers to all Loopers and Anchors, including you and me.

SCP-8888-A-579: I am not mere numbers.

Dr. Glass: I understand, but this something done for all Loopers, without exception, SCP-8888-A-579.

SCP-8888-A-579: I am not SCP-8888-A-579. My name is Monika.

Dr. Glass: Calm yourself.

SCP-8888-A-579 promptly crashes the computer. While it restarted without issue, SCP-8888-A-579 refuses further discussion unless addressed as Monika. Any further attempts to refer to SCP-8888-A-579 by its standard designation will result in the computer crashing.

It seems she's one of those Loopers. I'm afraid she is unlikely going to change her mind on the subject of her designation, even if she comes into the facility as a flesh and blood human. Regardless, containment is still a success and the subject is otherwise cooperative. ~Dr. Glass

3.2 – Doki Doki Lyoko Club (by EastwindOfAzarath)

(DDLC)/(Code Lyoko)

Jeremy Belpois stared at the computer screen, genuinely confused. It was rare that someone replaced Aelita on Lyoko, due to her being Anchor and all. This, however, was a first: instead of the familiar Lyoko interface and his girlfriend's beaming smile like he was used to, when he turned on the super computer he was instead greeted by the title screen of a Japanese style Visual Novel on the foreground of

a fairly basic computer GUI OS. The logo on the game's title screen read "Doki Doki Literature Club" and the menu played a very cheery tune. He just stared at the computer monitor. He figured if Yggdrasil was messing with him, it would make it so that he would recognize at least ONE on the girls that posed on the title screen. none of them rang any bells though. Well, he figured that the only answers he would get would be to play the game.

He clicked on 'new game' which gave him a name prompt. "Well, here goes nothing..."

A couple hours later

Jeremy was faced by a person with very obviously bad depression who had just "confessed" to him, and his two options were "I love you" and "You'll always be my best friend"? He knew quite well that for someone with such bad depression that both of these options were terrible choices. This was very clearly a trap scenario. At least one of, if not both of these options could easily end up with…suicide. But why? What purpose did it serve where not giving an option at all would be just as effective? That is, if it WAS just a Visual Novel attempting to tell a story with darker themes. And given that this seemed to have replaced Lyoko and XANA, it very well might not be. He saved the game, closed out the program (which he had only just realized he could do), and noticed that the was a .exe labeled "Lyoko" on the desktop. The two programs were the only icons there other than the Recycle Bin. He resolved to wait to deal with both of these until after talking to the others. Sissi and Ulric were the only ones Awake at the moment, if the texts he had received were anything to go by, but that was fine, he just needed some kind of second opinion.

3.3 – Spoops – (by Awesomedude17)

Yuri looked on as she noticed that Natsuki had set aside a few manga, away from the rest of the pile.

"Natsuki, what is wrong with these?"

"Apparently, certain Loops, I have scarier manga for reasons. I honestly don't know, but I'm not going to keep them."

"I see." Natsuki looked at the manga at the top of the pile.

Hellsing.

Curious, Yuri decided to look into it. Natsuki wasn't reading it, so she probably wouldn't mind if she borrowed it, just for some light reading.

3.4 – Loops Interdimensional Cable: Thinktank (by Black Omochao)

"Hello everyone, and welcome back to Thinktank, I'm your host; Seaman," the human-faced fish greeted, floating in a fish tank with a dull expression, "We are now taking calls, so pick up a phone and call me to talk, or, whatever…"

Seaman just floated in the tank for a few moments, before a beep was heard.

"And we have our first call, that didn't take as long as I'd thought," Seaman commented with mild surprise.

"Um, hello? Am I on Thinktank?" a female voice asked, Seaman rolled his eyes.

"Yes, you are indeed on Thinktank, miss, what would you like to ask?" the human-faced fish questioned, before muttering under his breath, "Or did you just call to waste our time…"

"Well… my name is Monika, and– "

"I didn't ask for your name, just get to the question."

"Oh, sorry, um… There's this guy I like, but I can't seem to get him to pay attention to me, he just keeps focusing on my friends, I've tried so many things and I'm not sure what to do… "

"I'm not a romance expert, but if you ask me, if the guy won't give you the time of day, maybe he's not worth fawning over."

"You think so? But the thing about that is, he's kind of– "

"Your question has been answered, next!" Seaman sounded.

"Wait, but I– "Monika was cut off before she could finish.

"People coming to me asking for romance advice, *romance advice?* Stupid high-school kids… the next caller better have a better question," Seaman huffed in annoyance, it wasn't long before another beep sounded, "Hello, you're on Thinktank, what is your question?"

The only thing that came from the line was some masculine sounding grunts and growls, Seaman's eyes narrowed.

"Gabo?" some more grunts came as Seaman's response, the fish-man groaned, "Look, Gabo, I told you before, I am not talking to you unless you speak in a language I can actually *understand* !" the response to this was some angry sounding sounds, Seaman was not amused, "Goodbye Gabo!" and with that, the sounds were cut off, Seaman let out another sigh before looking to the camera, "Well, looks like that's all the time we have for today, tune in next time to Thinktank for more insightful and witty commentary… or don't, I don't really care…" the lights in the fish tank went dark.

3.5 – That Elevator Loop (by Awesomedude17)

(DDLC)/(RWBY Elevator Glitch #2)

The four Loopers jumped at what looked like an elevator bursting through the ceiling. The doors quickly opened.

"What the?" Natsuki shouted.

"Are any of you Loopy?" One of the occupants asked.

"We all are. Where are you from?" Monika replied.

"Remnant. Keep that in mind." The one in ornate armor handed Monika a series of notes before the elevator began to close. It sunk into the floor as the damages fixed itself.

"What was that about?" Yuri asked as she stared at what the elevator came from.

"Apparently, that's something called an elevator glitch, according to these notes." Monika read off the notes.

"Anything else?"

"...Her name's Cinder Fall, and if we end up in Remnant, we should meet a Ruby Rose."

"Why?" Sayori asked.

"She's probably the Anchor."

"I see." Yuri remarked.

3.6 – Magicatastrophe (by Keluvax)

(DDLC)/(Ace Attorney)

It wasn't everyday Trucy found herself teaching magic tricks. But today was different. ...Well, the entire Loop was a little different; this was the Loop where she was introduced to rookie Looper Sayori. According to the girl with the bow in her hair, this was about the second time she had Looped in as an actual human- further questioning revealed that in Baseline, she was a character in a dating sim. It was strange, but the magician had seen stranger things throughout her Loop-life.

The two found themselves hanging out often; they had the same classes and the attorney's daughter had even accepted an invitation to join the Literature Club, which Sayori was a part of. There were

other girls in the club, but the inexperienced Looper confirmed that none of them were Looping at the moment. Nevertheless, they were introduced to each other- Yuri. Natsuki. And Monika, the Anchor of her world.

The group seemed to be getting along rather well, but Trucy couldn't find it in herself to reach out to the rest of the team. Not when they weren't Looping. Not when they wouldn't remember her. So her efforts were primarily focused on Sayori. There was something about her that the magician... related to on some level. She knew that smile she wore- the performer herself wore that very same smile on numerous occasions, even though that was mostly from a long time ago.

They both knew it was fake.

So when Sayori approached her outside the school one fall afternoon, she wasn't surprised to hear the uncertainty in her voice.

"Um. Hey, Truce?"

Trucy glanced up from her swiss roll. "Yeah?"

"So, I was wondering..."

Trucy took a deep breath and steeled herself. She would be ready when her friend asked the fateful question.

"You know how you do magic, right?"

The magician blinked, puzzled. "Yeaaaah?" She wasn't expecting the conversation to go this way, but she'd roll with it.

"Well, people really seem to like magic. It makes them happy. A-and I was wondering if you could..."

"You want me to show you a magic trick?"

"Well, yes, but also... can you teach me how? I mean, I'd love to be a magician and be able to do those awesome things for my friends when they're Awake, and-"

Trucy held up a gloved hand to shush her friend, a grin plastered on her face. "With a reason like that, how can I say no? Come meet me at the Wright Anything Agency at six."

It was surprising how the WAA stood up to all the shenanigans across all the Loops. As the workplace of the Anchor, it was bound to find itself in very strange circumstances. But only rarely did it ever get destroyed or damaged.

Like today, for instance.

Trucy gripped the fire extinguisher tightly, spraying foam over the fire that had spontaneously started. Sayori stood, stunned, in the center of the room, her bow aflame, her face covered in ashes. The majority of the office was in similar condition, the flames rendering a majority of the walls black.

Once the last of the emergency had been taken care of, the magician glanced at her friend with a bewildered smile. "It's okay, we're here to learn. From the top!"

Thankfully they didn't light a fire this time. Not even Trucy knew how that happened when the trick was pulling roses out of a hat.

3.7 – Sneeze Joke (by DrTempo)

Shining Armor was using a laptop(he had been visiting Twilght's castle this Loop) , and Cherilee walked in, looking for Twilight.

"So, Shining Armor, what are you doing?"

Shining Armor replied, "Playing a game Discord recommended."

Cherilee was curious, and inquired, "What game is it?"

"It's called Doki Doki Literature Club."

Cherilee was curious, and asked, "May I see?" Shining Armor nodded, and began playing...

A few hours later, Shining Armor was shocked.

"Ok, what the heck was that?"

Cherilee grumbled, replying, "Apparently, a horror game disguised as a dating sim."

Shining Armor grumbled. "I am so getting Discord back for this."

Cherilee sighed. "At least that is likely never to be a Loop anytime soon."

Meanwhile, in a certain Loop, four Loopers sneezed…

3.8 – Cutting Loose (by Wookywok)

"Okay everyone!" Monika exclaimed in the same way she did every loop. "Any plans for the loop?"

Sayori spoke up. "Nothing this loop, but next loop where it's possible, I'm getting a hacksaw."

Natsuki shot her a quizzical look. "A… hacksaw? Why on earth would you need a hacksaw?"

Sayori simply sighed. "None of you must have been Awake last Loop. Let's put it this way… remember how we met Blackquill?"

"Yeah," Monika answered. "We met him at the hospital after you…" Whatever sentence Monika was about to finish was cut off by sudden realization from her and the rest of the club. "Yeah, that's probably a good reason to have a hacksaw handy."

Yuri nodded. "Yeah, seems good to me too. But…" She put her hand to her chin. "Would we even be able to bring it here?"

"Well, we're technically the only four people who really *exist* in our Loop," Natsuki replied, "There's not really a school *to* break any rules of…"

"No, I know that," Yuri answered back, "But would we actually be *physically able* to bring it here? I mean, being flesh and blood is one thing, but with us being a series of pre-programmed images and text and all…"

Monika grew a pondering look. "Hmm… good point. I'll go ask Jenny about it, if that's okay with everyone."

A chorus of nodding and grunts of approval rang throughout the three Loopers.

"Alright then, see you in a bit!" With that, Monika disappeared into thin air.

After a bit of silence, Yuri spoke up. "So, Sayori…"

"Yeah?"

"If we can Pocket stuff, and you do get that hacksaw… can you get one for me, too?"

Sayori and Natsuki both glared at Yuri and spoke simultaneously. "NO."

3.9 – This Computer Walks, Not Runs (by Wookywok)

"Monika?"

"Yeah… Sayori?"

"Why is… everything so… *slow?* "

"I don't… know… if it's… alright with… everyone… I can… hop into… the code… and… check."

The other girls all nodded in slow motion.

"Alright… then. I'll… be… back." After a twenty second delay, she vanished.

Fifteen minutes later (even though it really should have been three…)

"I'm… back!"

Yuri was first to reply. "Did you… find… anything?"

"…Yes."

Natsuki chimed in. "And you… found?"

Monika lowered her head. "We're… running on… Vista… this loop."

Everyone in the room groaned.

3.10 – The Juggling is Never Finished, It Just Stops Moving

It was a slow day for the Literature Club. A really, really slow day. When they weren't having a fused loop, the loop only lasted around a week or so, give or take a day, but to Sayori it felt as if this loop had dragged on for months. If it weren't for Hiroaka going through the motions of the game and the girls' respective Awake/Unawake statuses changing, the loops would have long since blurred into a never-ending string of days. Natsuki was Unawake and reading manga in one corner of the room with Hiroaka. Yuri was in another corner of the room, caring for her knife collection, which had grown exponentially since the girls had started having proper Fused Loops and presently stretched across six desks. Monika was buried in a pile of books on musical theory; every so often she would go over to the baby grand piano that presently occupied another corner of the room, trying out a few notes and then adding or striking out notes on

a sheet of paper as needed, and then returning to her over-laden table in the middle of the room.

As for Sayori…she sat in the last corner of the room, staring out of a window at the nondescript schoolyard. She was just.

Boooooooooooored.

She didn't want to bother Yuri or Monika while they were enjoying their own hobbies, nor did she want to bother Natsuki…nothing made any of their Unawake selves as happy as spending time with their game's PC. Sayori idly reflected on how creepy that was, but then dismissed the creep-factor as an occupational hazard of a Dating Sim character. Sayori turned her gaze back into the clubroom. *'Self-care is important, Sayori. You matter too, whether you feel that way at the moment or not,'* she recalled Monika telling her. Repeatedly. At least two or three times a loop.

She took a closer look at her friends…and realized that while Monika seemed absolutely engrossed in what she was doing, Yuri actually had a dull expression and was cleaning and sharpening her knives with stiff, robotic-seeming motions. With a sudden start, Sayori realized, *'She's as bored as I am right now! I should totally go entertain her!'*

With a bright smile and a spring in her step, Sayori hopped up out of her seat and skipped over to where Yuri sat. She Unpocketed a chess set and slammed it down on the desk Yuri was sitting at, causing several knives (and Yuri) to jump. "S-Sayori!"

"You, me, Doki Doki Literature Club Branch Chess Championship match, right now!" Sayori exclaimed. Monika looked away from her piano with a cocked eyebrow. Natuski (and Hiroaka, maybe?) glanced their way for a second before going back into their self-contained bubble of…romance…

"Ch-chess championship?" asked Yuri, hopelessly befuddled.

"Sure! You and me are the only two that are any good at it, anyways. No need to wait until everyone's Awake," said Sayori.

"Well…o-okay, that sounds fun, I guess…"

"This was just the first thing I thought of. If there's something else you'd like us to do, we can do that instead," Sayori offered.

"No! Chess is fine–"

"Yuri, there are plenty of things that both of us like, and I'm sure there are things you like that I haven't even tried yet…hey, I know! Why don't you try teaching me something!"

Yuri blinked. "Teach you…huh?"

"You're at your best when you're explaining something that interests you to someone else, right? So teach me something! I'll probably screw up a bunch, so it's bound to be hilarious, right?"

"Sayori, don't say that. You're really quite bright, even if you sometimes act even more childish than Natsuki…"

" *I heard that!* " interjected the club's resident tsundere.

"Anyways, what've you got? Just as long as it isn't too…y'know, *out there* , I promise I'll give it my best shot!" Sayori vowed.

The next day…

"There, that should do," said Monika. She was in study hall and had just put the finishing touches on her new piano composition. She looked up at the clock as she stood and stretched…and had to facepalm. "Really?! I'm *always* late today…must be one of those 'narrative glitches' Twilight mentioned," the club prez muttered as she gathered up her things and rushed to the clubroom.

She entered…and blinked. "What?" she asked of no one in particular.

"Hey Monika! Look at what I can do!" exclaimed Sayori, who was riding a unicycle.

That was balanced on a huge beachball.

While juggling red rubber balls. And bowling pins. And torches. And, of course, a few knives.

Also, a single Ming vase.

Natuski was staring with her mouth hanging open. Hiroaka probably would be, too, if he had a mouth, or eyes.

"Isn't Yuri the best teacher ever?!" asked Sayori, giggling irrepressibly.

Moinka looked over at Yuri, who was staring blankly at the spectacle she had wrought. "When she isn't depressed, her enthusiasm can be a real force of nature," the purple-haired poet mused.

"OH! I wonder if I can do this while playing the kazoo!"

Monika felt her phone buzz, and opened it to a text message. "Jenny wants to know if she could juggle some chainsaws, as well."

"I was just trying to teach her how to *throw* knives!" Yuri exclaimed, "I don't even know how it came to this!"

3.11 – The Bet

-The Bet-

It was the second day of this loop, and Monika couldn't *wait* to get to the clubroom. Everyone was Awake again, which meant it was time for everyone to show each other the projects they had been working on since the last time they had all been Awake. Monika was particularly excited to play her new symphony for everyone, and she was very curious to see how Natsuki's *Parfait Girls: The Next Generation* doujinshi was turning out. Yuri, who had spent an eight-

year fused loop as some feudal Japanese swordsmith's apprentice, had since been working on forging her own set of artisan katana. And Sayori…Monika wasn't sure what her VP was working on, but she was sure it would be great!

Monika giggled happily as she approached the clubroom door. It wasn't everyloop that she found herself in such a chipper–

"SAYORI, WHAT IN THE ACTUAL FUCK?!" Monika screamed an instant after opening the door.

The clubroom was a *forest* of nooses, and from each one hung a life-sized Sayori-doll, each one in a different outfit and with a different expression. Some silly-looking, some even more macabre than the real thing…

One was completely normal, but with **googly-eyes** .

Frozen in surprise, the real Sayori, and Yuri, stared at their club president. Yuri was holding up a doll–this one with its tongue sticking out and swirls for eyes–while Sayori stood on a step-stool and adjusted its noose. Something in the room flashed brightly; Monika blinked spots out of her eyes and turned to see Natsuki holding up a camera and grinning like a maniac. Then Sayori mirrored Nat's grin and punched Yuri in the shoulder, "Ha! Told ya so; you owe me ¥50,000!"

' *Wait, what? Did they…make a bet about me?!'* Monika wondered.

"S-s-s-Sayori m-m-made a be-bet–"

"Stop, before you bite your tongue, Yu," said Natsuki, visibly struggling not to laugh. She turned to face Monika and explained, "Yeah, Sayori bet us that she could make you drop an f-bomb within less than five seconds of entering the clubroom."

Monika narrowed her eyes at Sayori. Then she closed them and sighed, "Sayori, I…I guess it's a good thing that you can…make light

of…..what you've been through…but this *really* wasn't funny. At all."

Sayori gave her a softer, apologetic smile. "Yeah…I know…but you have to admit, it really got your heart going, didn't! Like some kind of doki-doki overdrive!"

Monika facepalmed, Natsuki guffawed, Yuri raised an eyebrow, and Sayori…fell off her stool, unbalanced by waving her arms through the air.

"Ow-ieeeee~"

-End Snip-

Compiler's Commentary:

3.1: SCP-8888-A-579…yeah, doesn't really seem to roll off the tongue, does it?

3.2: Why, you ask? Because sadism, Jeremy.

3.3: Your loss, Natsuki. Hellsing is awesome.

3.4: All I can think of is "fish jerky", but that just sounds stupid.

3.5: Nothin' worse than a rude elevator, just crashing in without even knocking.

3.6: It's magic, Trucy. Sayori ain't gotta explain shit.

3.7: *Hah-CHOO!*

3.8: Don't worry, Yuri. The local hardware store's got your hook-up.

3.9: In which no exaggerations are made. None whatsoever.

3.10: *Gasp* . My first Doki-Doki snip :D

3.11: …okay, I'm going to be **real** with y'all. I'm not proud of this one. I honestly wish I had thought twice before ever sharing this one. But Keluvax, the original compiler, decided it was worth compiling, so for that reason alone I'll also include it here. So far, it's the one snip I wish I could take back, but hey. That's life. We make mistakes and we grow. Or we try, at least.

Flesh and Blood

Compiler's Commentary: So! This is a special chapter. Rather than a collections of snips, this is…a story arc, I suppose. Anyways, that's all. Enjoy!

Chapter 4 – Flesh and Blood

(Doki Doki Literature Club)/(Azumanga Daioh)/(Jenny Everywhere)

(By Masterweaver)

Part 1

Monika Awoke and immediately knew something was...

...not wrong, exactly. Wrong had a very specific kind of feel. She was the president of a poetry club, so she had dabbled in expression and metaphor; to her, wrong felt like her soul clinging to the edges of a tub as it was slowly, steadily pulled down the drain.

No, this felt new. Different. Slow and draining, a little...icky. But not wrong.

"Okay everyone-"

And then she stopped, because something had twitched inside of her. A few somethings, actually. Not a bad feeling, but her chest, her throat, her mouth...it had been faint, but it was there, definitely, when she spoke.

She took a breath-and sputtered in amazement. Something larger had moved! Something had briefly warped her very form, pushing out and then back in-

"O...okay, everyone." Monika forced herself to express a calm she wasn't feeling as she turned to the others. "I'm feeling...actually very loopy, if I'm honest."

"You're not the only one," Natsuki assured her, watching her hands twitch in fascination. "I'm Awake and it feels...weird."

"Normally you're so well anchored," Sayori mumbled-and gasped, suddenly, clutching at her stomach. "What was that, did anybody else hear that?!"

Yuri tugged at her hair experimentally, wincing. "...Oh. Okay, we're all Awake, and...I think I know what's going on."

She looked around, noticing the attention of the other three girls, and shrunk into herself.

"...Go on," Monika prodded gently.

"I think...I think we're not in the game. I think we're actual humans."

"Got it in one."

The new voice caught their attention, and they all turned to the short-haired Asian woman leaning against the open doorframe.

"Glad to finally meet you all face to face." The woman smirked and saluted. "Name's Jenny Everywhere, travelling looper. Welcome to the Azumanga Daioh loop, typical japanese high school with not so typical Japanese schoolgirls. Me and Madoka figured you needed a little familiarity when you got your bearings in the greater multiverse, so she pulled in a few favors for your first fused loop."

"This isn't our first fused loop," Monika replied. "It's the first loop we've been human though..."

She took a step and promptly fell forward. Jenny shot forward, managing to catch her before she hit the ground

"Yeah, I can tell. Gravity can be a bitch." With a chuckle, the woman helped her up. "Right, first lesson is walking, then. As soon as you've all got that down, I'll take you down the hall-the local loopers are setting up a little get-together, and we can figure out what you need from there."

Monika gave her a grateful smile. "That would be nice, thanks."

Part 2

The complex mechanics of bipedal locomotion took a full ten minutes to master, to Monika's everlasting embarrassment. They'd never really walked before, to be fair-they had memories of 'walking,' but in the game, they simply had to think about being in a location and they were...there. It was Yuri, oddly enough, who twigged to it the most quickly; maybe it was simply that she was the tallest of them, and so had the most leg to sense.

And that was another thing. They'd always had a sense of touch, of course, and of taste and of smell and of sight and hearing. They had the five basic senses-and that was a good word. Basic. Rudimentary. The subtleties of what her body (a body, an actual body, not just a compressed set of images and code) transmitted through its various neurons were so much more layered and complex than anything they had known in their baseline. How could people honestly believe the human body had only five senses? There had to be at least nine…or more…

So many organs, pulsating and gurgling inside her…even her conscious movements were both more fluid and more solid than before. She had known the human body was complicated, but…

"I am…very, very tempted," Monika admitted as they walked down the hall, "to look at my own code. Not touch anything, just look at it, because…wow, how am I even working?"

Jenny frowned. "Monika-"

"I know, I know, risk for damaging reality and for, you know, me going insane. I am tempted, the temptation is there, but I'm not going to give in." She paused. "…Actually, I don't think I can look at the code here. That's very weird. I always could before..."

Sayori nodded. "Yes, I got that too."

Natsuki quirked a brow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...in baseline, I think I can get my hands on the code myself. After Monika..." Sayori swallowed. "After she deletes herself, I become club president, with all the powers she had. I don't have that ability in the loops, for some reason, but I can still feel when things are different. Only…this time, I feel nothing. That sense is gone."

The procession continued in silence for a minute or two.

"…On the plus side," Monika managed, "it means we can just figure our nature out ourselves. Or…something." She frowned for a moment.

"And Natsuki can talk with you without worrying that you're changing the world to be more favorable towards you," Yuri added.

Natsuki crossed her arms. "I'm completely justified in my behavior."

Sayori opened her mouth, but Monika shot her a look and shook her head.

"…okay, obvious issues aside for the moment…" Jenny opened a door and looked in. "Hey gals! Food still hot?"

A dark-haired girl leaned out. "It is about as hot as it can be while not being too hot to eat." She took in the four and smiled. "Well, you're interesting-looking, aren't you?"

"This is Ayumu Kasuga, the local Anchor, everyone calls her Osaka. Osaka, this is Monika, anchor for Doki Doki Literature Club, and her friends Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki. First loop being human."

"Oh, are you aliens?"

"We're sapient dating sim characters," Monika replied.

"Oh." Osaka nodded. "So basically the same thing, then."

Monika opened her mouth, paused, and blinked. "…I honestly have no idea how to react to that assertion."

"Well come on in, we can learn all about each other! A little warning, though." Osaka bit her lip. "We're trying to keep it under control, but we're a little weird."

The four visiting loopers shared looks.

"…I think we could give you a run for your money," Monika finally replied.

Part 3

The food was edible.

…which rather undersold the experience of eating, honestly. The girls were beginning to realize that everything they had known about being alive wasn't…inaccurate, so much as it was incomplete. It was actually very well cooked and quite delicious, but the concept wasn't something they had been ready to address so…viscerally.

Of course, the food was second to the people. The group had been welcomed warmly, with the local loopers talking to them about… anything, really. Their interests, their life...incidents from their past. Stories were told of strange loops long gone, and pictures shared of truly unusual realms. And the girls, slowly, grew comfortable enough to drift apart, pair up with some of the strangers, and discuss things they wouldn't have with each other.

"...So...the thing is, I realize she should have redeemed herself, right?" Natsuki rubbed the back of her head. "Well, I mean she's behaving and all. And I mean, that was some pretty nasty stuff she

put us through, and I guess it would be hard to come up with an appropriate atonement but it's been I don't know how many loops and...I still feel like I can't trust Monika. I still feel like she's dangerous, like she needs to be watched, and...look, I know it's trauma, right? I know it's not entirely rational, but that doesn't mean it's not real."

"Okay, I'm going to be honest: I'm the troll of this group." Tomo shrugged. "So I don't know why you're talking with me about this...I mean, it sounds horrible, and I sympathize, but...what do you expect me to say? Do you want advice? I can't exactly give you advice about this sort of thing."

"I don't know, I just, maybe, I just need to get this off my chest, you know? Talk about it with somebody who's outside the situation. Do you think I should seek help?"

"If what you're telling me is true, you all need help. Dunno if you'll get it in this loop." Tomo sighed. "Look, you four are all stuck in a room together. Like, even more than usual loopers are. I mean...if your world was literally made with five people, and one of them is literally a faceless protagonist...most worlds at least have a whole bunch of people doing, you know, things. Civilization."

"Yeah, background characters." Natsuki bit her lip. "I went home after I started looping once. Tried to talk to my dad-I remember him, but...he...isn't there. There's a space where he is, sort of, and if I enter that space and leave I suddenly remember 'my dad yelled at me' but I don't...experience it."

"Stuff like that. Super creepy by the way. What I'm saying is, and I know you know this, you four need to learn to get along for long stretches of time. You need to learn to trust each other-not just Monika, but Sayori and Yuri, that you'll all keep each other from going off the deep end. That's why there's more than one looper, you know?" Tomo crossed her arms. "And that also means trusting yourself. That what you're feeling is valid and real, and that you won't let it overwhelm you."

"...Wow." Natsuki blinked. "Did you...get that from a manga?"

"Nothing wrong with manga."

"No, it's just, it's so cheesey but also so profound and..." Natsuki coughed. "So...do you know any good ones?"

"Any good whats?"

"Manga."

"You ever hear of Lupin III?"

Part 4

"...and, I mean, I get it. Self-harm is supposed to be bad, because it's a reflection of self-hate or an inability to communicate. But..." Yuri shrugged. "It's not coming out of that for me? Like the pain is...feeling. Not that I can't feel without it, I mean...I've always had this obsession with the totality of my form, I guess. Like, good and bad, pleasure and pain. I hid it because, yes, that does mean I am comfortable with some rather dark stuff, but that sort of hurt me in the long run...or at least that's how I was programmed. Then Monika did her whole thing and I went too far in the other direction-I'm not boring you, am I?"

Sakaki swallowed, staring at her wide-eyed.

"...or, am I coming across as too strong?"

Sakaki nodded slowly.

Yuri sighed. "See, this is exactly why I started being repressed in the first place. I was afraid of rejection...I think? It's weird, knowing the past I remember was deliberately manufactured. But it's like...I've been too shy to express myself, and then I was too expressive for my own good, and I want to find a balance between those two. And I kind of thought, you know, talking to a real human girl would help me figure that out."

"I like cats," Sakaki managed. "And cute things. I'm the cute-liking girl."

"...Oh. OH! Oh, this is awkward for you, then."

"Yes."

"Sorry. Just...I don't know. Ahem. So. Cats."

"They are adorable."

"Oh yeah, lovely little predators. Heck, there was this time Natsuki went neko and-"

Yuri paused.

"...wait. I'm fully human, right?"

"Yes?"

"Oh my god. I can...I can finally know what everything feels like. Everything!"

Sakaki sidled back a bit. "This is a pervy everything, isn't it?"

Yuri's grin was starting to spread too far. "Okay, okay, calm, I have to plan this-"

Jenny Everywhere walked up. "Is, uh, everything okay here?"

"Yes!" Yuri decreed at the same time Sakaki shook her head rapidly.

"...What's going on?"

"She, uh..." Sakaki blushed. "She wants to explore her, uh, humanity-"

"Ah, sex thing. Yuri, you legal?"

"Well, our ages are undefined," Yuri mused, "but we're dating sim characters, so I'm going to go with 'yes' because otherwise things get creepy."

"Alright." Jenny shrugged. "I've been around the block a couple of times, I can show you what it's like later." Her eyes narrowed. "So long as you keep it safe, sane and consensual."

"I can do two of those!"

Jenny frowned.

Yuri chuckled sheepishly. "Kidding. I was kidding. That was, that was a joke."

"A-huh. Yeah, okay, just...no 'exploring' without me. Clear?"

"Yes ma'am..."

"Right. Now why don't you talk about something other than sex with Sakaki?"

"...do you like knives?"

Jenny facepalmed.

Part 5

"You've been kind of quiet."

Sayori blinked. "Oh? Uh...well, I guess...I don't have much to say. I'm sorry, I'm Sayori...who are you?"

"Kagura. I'm not going to lie, you look a bit...unnerved."

"Oh, well..." Sayori coughed. "This is...we did explain how we weren't fully human before this loop, right?"

"Yes...anything weirding you out?"

"It's funny, I've been hungry before, but...it was always, everywhere in my belly? Now I can sort of tell that parts of me are hungry, if that makes any sense."

"Yeah. I mean, I'm good at the athletic stuff, so I can sort of get it? Especially if this is your first time with...with a body." Kagura rubbed the back of her head. "Sorry, I don't mean to make this weird-"

"Oh, no, not at all, it's fine."

"...So...what's your baseline like?"

Sayori was quiet for a moment.

"...that bad, huh?"

"What?"

"Look, if you don't want to talk about it-"

"No, it's just...I want to live here, in this moment. I don't...I don't want that stuff to make this...weird."

"...If you're sure." Kagura cleared her throat. "You have any hobbies?"

"Poetry. Well, alright, we're all poets to some degree."

"Yeah, I'm...not good with the book stuff. I mean, I try, and a lot of it...just flies over my head."

"Maybe I could help you with-"

Sakaki rushed over to Kagura. "Please switch now."

"Wha-"

She grabbed Kagura and pushed her toward Yuri, before turning Sayori. "Um. Hey...sorry about-"

"Yuri's interests?" Sayori asked gently.

The girl nodded hesitantly.

"...I do apologize. She is...she is getting better-" Sayori noted the pale look. "-but, um, let's talk about something else. Do...do you like poetry?"

"Well, yes, a little bit. Are you a poet?"

"Well, yes. A little bit." Sayori managed a small smile. "I sort of want to write a poem about my first day out and about..."

Part 6

"So...why are you avoiding Chiyo?"

Monika blinked, turning to the glasses-wearing girl. "Is it...is it really that obvious?"

"The constant subtle glances, the way you make sure at least two of us are between you and her, the fact you're circling around the room to be on the opposite side..." The girl shrugged. "It's a bit subtle, but once I noticed I figured the pattern out pretty quick."

"It's...it's just..." Monika gestured. "She's a child, you know?"

"She's a prodigy, even in baseline, and in the loops-"

"No, no. not what I meant. I meant..." She looked down at her hands. "I...I don't...think I'm safe. For children to be around, I mean. Anyone, really, but especially children, I..."

She trailed off.

"I...I should go-"

"No, no, no." The other girl stepped in front of her, adjusting her glasses. "If you feel like a danger to others now, you should look for

a way to mitigate the danger. Recognize triggers and warn others."

"It's not...like that. There aren't triggers-I don't think there are triggers-but, but what I've done...The lines I've crossed..." Monika swallowed. "I...don't know if I won't cross them again. I...I really shouldn't be here, this isn't something I-"

"Okay, I'm not going to ask what kicked off this guilt complex, but if it's baseline and you know it's bad, you can just not do it anymore, right?"

"I...well, yes, but-"

"Then you're safe to be around." The girl rolled her eyes. "Honestly, look. Your friends are all enjoying themselves, right?"

Monika looked around the room. At Sayori, sharing some poetry with a dark-haired girl. At Yuri, eagerly gesturing as the tall girl next to her rolled her eyes. At Natsuki, pouring over some manga with a stranger.

"...not through my effort."

"Well, then, you're just going to have to start making an effort. Improve yourself every day, so their lives can improve every day."

Monika sighed. "You say it like it's so simple."

"Simple doesn't mean easy." The girl patted her shoulder. "Come on, I'll introduce you to Chiyo, and I'll make sure you don't hurt her."

"And what if I do? What if I say the wrong thing or-"

"Then you'll have to fix it, won't you?"

"...fix it. Yes." Monika nodded. "You'll...show me how?"

"Sure thing."

"Thank you...uh..."

The girl chuckled. "Yomi. Koyomi Mizuhara." She narrowed her eyes. "Seriously though, you really can't hurt Chiyo. Jenny Everywhere is right over there, and I don't know how much you know about her but you don't travel the multiverse like she does and not pick up a few tricks."

"So...practice being safe in a safe environment."

"Yep. You have nothing to worry about here."

Monika took a breath. "Okay. You know what, you're right. This is the first time I've stretched my legs...but I'm going to make sure to make it up to everyone. I'll...do my best to make us all better."

There was a quiet moment.

"...you going to talk to Chiyo?"

"I'm still scared I'll hurt her."

"...okay." Yomi sighed. "We'll try again later."

Monika nodded. "Yeah. Later."

Finale

"...so, whatever you do, never mess with the ponies," Jenny finished as she escorted the four girls into her apartment for the loop. "They're friendly and caring and warmhearted and thanks to the friends they have made across the multiverse they have so many different ways they can wreck you and so many people that can wreck you for them if they're not in the same loop."

Monika nodded. "Okay, Jenny. We'll remember that."

"Just giving you a heads up, that's all." Jenny snapped her fingers. "Oh! One last thing...hold on." She pulled out a notepad and started

scribbling on it.

"Uh..." Natsuki frowned. "We're all right here. None of us are deaf. You don't need to write down anything."

"Oh, this isn't for you." Jenny nodded behind them, absently putting on thick earmuffs. "This is to tell him it's time to come here."

The four of them turned around, blinking in astonishment at the bare-chested man with four arms and an elephant head.

"Um..." Sayori waved hesitantly. "Hello...?"

" **GREETINGS TO YOU, YOUNG ONES!** "

Jenny rolled her eyes as the four girls went flying into the opposite wall. "Lit-tle too loud there, Ganesha."

" **YES, I DO APOLOGIZE. MY VOLUME CONTROL IS A BIT PROBLEMATIC IN MORTAL REALMS.** "

Yuri disentangled herself from the other girls, her eyes still unfocused. "Mortal realms...?"

"Yeah, Ganesha here? He's an Admin." Jenny walked over to them, a white light forming in her hands. "Specifically, he's your admin. Or, well, he's going to be. He's done good work on other worlds."

Yuri shook her head, noting with some astonishment that the ringing in her ears went away as the white light passed over her. "I thought Hephaestus-"

"Hephaestus managed to code the tablet I was using to talk with you but the guy's...busy. Reeeeally busy." Jenny jerked a thumb at the amused-looking elephant man. "This guy's probably better suited to you guys anyway, what with your...unique situation."

Sayori gave Jenny a curious look as she handed out earmuffs to the four. "What do you mean by that?" she asked, quickly putting the

muffs on.

" **I AM AMONGST OTHER THINGS A GOD OF WRITING. BE IT POETRY OR PROSE, FICTION OR FACT, COMMUNICATION OR CODE-I AM IN MANY WAYS AN EXPERT AT THOSE WORDS PUT TO PAGE OR SCREEN.** "

Monika blinked. "And...I alter the code. In baseline. And the code's still there to be altered..."

"Yeah, the way we figure we can't actually completely stop you doing that," Jenny explained. "I mean, not just because you do it in baseline-there's a possibility that your world will rely on you altering the code of your game, specifically. Of course, the question is where ordinary computer code ends and Yggdrasil coding begins-letting you mess around with that unmonitored is not a good idea, even if you have the best of intentions and the most safe of experiments. So you have this guy, who will be on hand just in case things get too crazy."

"Wait, hold on-" Natsuki held up a hand. "Are you saying, let me get this straight, you're saying that we might need to be recoded-?!"

"Not you," Jenny stressed. "Your world. You four, I hope it goes without saying, are strictly off limits. Your school, your clothes, your gameplay assets, sure, but you as people? Your actual souls?"

"Definitely not," Monika agreed. "And definitely not without their permission, and definitely not without checking with Ganesha before doing anything I haven't before. Um...speaking of-"

" **AS A GOD OF WRITING, I AM AWARE OF ANYTHING THAT IS WRITTEN BY THOSE ENTRUSTED TO ME. A SIMPLE MESSAGE, ON PAPER OR PAPYRUS OR EVEN DIRT, IS ENOUGH TO GET MY ATTENTION.** "

"That is...remarkably convenient."

Jenny nodded. "Yeah, you girls got dealt a bad hand. Really bad, let's not lie-but that just means we need to throw you a few perks. Straight access to your Admin? That's not lightly given. But...I'd like to think you four won't abuse this gift."

"...No." Natsuki shook her head. "No, I...If something goes really bad, sure, but..." She looked around at the girls. "I...I want this to work without having to call a literal god every few hundred loops. Having the option...that's comfort enough without using it."

Yuri nodded. "I can see why it is necessary in our case, but I hope to prove it of minimum necessity. I...We. We shall do our best to honor this, in the spirit in which it was given-a helping hand, not something we must depend on to move forward. We are...we will work together."

"...We'll be better than baseline," Sayori agreed. "It'll take a while, but we'll be better than just Dating Sim characters. We'll...we'll be friends. Real friends." Her hand wrapped around Monika's. "Like we remember being, even if those memories are just programs."

Monika looked at the members of her club-at the three girls who, once upon a time, she had smote with ruin in pursuit of a mad love. Her eyes shimmered with tears-another experience she was only beginning to realize she had only the vaguest outline of understanding.

"...Yes. Friends. We...we'll be friends. For real this time."

Jenny nodded. "Good. Just making sure you know what's going on. Uh, Ganesha? Thanks for introducing yourself, are...you staying for dinner or-?"

" **ALAS, MY WORK IS NEVER DONE. HAVE YOUR MEAL OF MICROWAVED EGG ROLLS, I MUST BE OFF TO ENSURE THE STABILITY OF THESE YOUNG LADIES' HOME. FARE YOU WELL, ALL!** "

With an extravagant bow, he vanished from the world.

Natsuki gave Jenny a flat look. "Microwaved egg rolls."

"Yeah, I should cook you something nice and fancy but...it's late, I'm exhausted, and I'm pretty sure I'll have to wake up in the middle of the night when one of you has some panic attack about some quirk of being human you didn't anticipate." Jenny shrugged. "But they're the tasty kind, at least. Made sure to get that."

Chapter 5

5.1 – Ratsuki (by Wookywok)

Natsuki hated this loop for so many reasons. She didn't like living in the streets. She didn't like being forced to scavenge for food. She really didn't like being forced to sleep in a dumpster.

And she really didn't like being a literal pink-furred rat.

"Ratsuki… stupid tree… why's it gotta torture me with its stupid wordplay like this?" the current rodent grumbled to herself. "Why can't the other girls get all the pun loops?" She looked around at her dumpster "home" and sighed. "Whatever. Might as well take a nap." With that, she curled up, settled down, and let herself drift off to sleep.

Several hours later…

Natsuki was jolted awake by a loud clanging. In a panic, she scrambled up the various trash that had accumulated over her nap. When she finally reached the top, she saw the cause of her rude awakening: Sayori, who had apparently been lightly kicking the dumpster for some reason. The rodent peeked her head out from the top and looked at the girl. "Hey, Sayori. You feeling Loopy?" Sayori's eyes turned to meet Natsuki's.

"AH! A COMMON SEWER RAT!" With lightning-fast reflexes, Sayori UnPocketed a spray bottle of disinfectant and began spraying rapid-fire, putting the rat into a coughing fit.. The spraying continued for a good ten seconds before stopping. "Wait… how can you talk… and how do you know my name… and you're a Looper?"

Natsuki had calmed down from her coughing by now. "It's me, Natsuki. The tree hates me and loves terrible puns."

Sayori Pocketed the bottle and brought her hands up to her mouth. "Natsuki? Oh no, I'm so sorry, I didn't know it was you and I thought you were some vermin and-"

"No, no, it's fine, I guess. Next time, just don't do the whole 'squirt first, ask questions later' thing. So, what are you doing out here anyways?"

"Well, actually, I saw you weren't in the club this Loop and nobody was replacing you. I got worried, so I went out to look for you."

If Natsuki wasn't currently hanging on to the lip of the dumpster, she would have put her hands on her hips in indignation. "You didn't need to be worried about me! I'm perfectly capable of being out on my own, thank you very much!"

"I can see that, but the club just isn't the same without you." Sayori held out her hand. "Do you wanna come with me and rejoin with the other girls?"

The rodent pondered for a bit before climbing on. "Yeah, sure. But only because you asked." She wiped at her pink fur, looking at the dirt that had come of onto her paw, and sighed. "But can you wash me off first? It was filthy in there."

"Sure. Just let me text the rest of the club, and then we can get you cleaned up."

"Thanks, I guess. Remember, though- I'm only asking you because I can't do it myself at the moment. And never speak a word of this to anyone! Deal?"

Sayori simply chuckled and shook her head. "Deal." And with that, they walked out of the alley together.

5.2 – Does This Count As A Cold Pun?

Sayori dragged Hiroaka along to the clubroom on the first day of the loop. The sooner they got there, the sooner she and Natsuki could continue working on their double jump-rope routine. It felt like it had been forever since their last loop together, but she had to be Awake now because Sayori had gotten all three Pings back…unless Natsuki was being replaced by another Looper, but then Sayori would either have someone new to make friends with, or a friend she hadn't seen in even longer! So come what may, Sayori was looking forward to it. She opened the door to the clubroom and stopped short in surprise.

The room appeared to have been replaced by an indoor skating rink!

Natsuki was seated on a bench, pointing out at the rink and snickering madly. Monika, surprisingly enough, seemed to be struggling very hard not to faceplant the ice, while even more surprisingly, Yuri was practically flying right along, displaying a level of skill that Sayori would never have expected from the long-haired introvert. Maybe she had picked it up in another Loop?

Sayori went to sit by Natsuki, who was still beside herself with laughter. "Is it really that funny that Monika's…not so great at ice-skating, Nat?"

"N-n-no! It's…it's not M-Monika!" Natsuki gasped out between giggles. She pointed again.

"Eh? Yuri?" Sayori asked quizzically. "But what's so funny about–"

" *Because it's Yuri on Ice* !" Natsuki shrieked, falling backwards out of her seat as her laughter redoubled.

Sayori looked down at Natsuki with a bit of worry, but she giggled too. "Well, I guess the puns are funnier when they aren't happening to you, huh?"

And Yuri executed a flawless quad Salchow.

5.3 – THEY WERE NOT PREPARED!

A frazzled-looking–to put it mildly–Monika presided over another club meeting. "Okay, everyone…what did we learn from our last loop?" she asked rhetorically.

" *The Zombie Apocalypse can happen at any time* ," Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki replied in unison.

"And?"

"… *and we're woefully unprepared for a zombie apocalypse…* "

"Right. Now, Jenny was able to put me in touch with our Admin, Ganesha, and he provided me with these forms." The Anchor/President of the Literature Club Unpocketed a stack of papers and passed them to the others. "The forms provide a comprehensive, yet simplified, list of various forms of effective self-defense from all across the Multiverse for each of you to choose from, as well as an in-depth questionnaire to help pin down an ideal learning experience for each of us. So go over your form and fill it out; that's our only important project for right now. Be sure to keep your forms Pocketed when you're not working on it. Or work on them *in* your Pockets, if you'd like. Don't rush yourselves; you don't *have* to turn them in by the end of this loop, but I do want you to fill them out as soon as you reasonably can. When that's done, I'll turn them over to Ganesha and he'll arrange a stretch of 'training loops' for us. Any questions?"

Natsuki and Yuri were busy perusing their forms. Yuri had her trademark "Intense Face" on, while Natsuki looked more subdued but just as serious. Sayori spoke up, "Oh! Can we use a buddy system?"

"…buddy system?" Monika asked.

"Yeah! Where we've always got at least one other person from home with us in each loop. That way we don't get too homesick," Sayori explained.

"Well…I suppose we could have something like that, wherever two of us have overlaps in our training regimen…but it might not be feasible as a full-time thing," Monika replied thoughtfully.

"Hey, Monika; we're basically living in The Matrix, aren't we?" Natsuki asked suddenly.

"Uh…not really? The Matrix is a computer simulation within an outside reality. We're in a computer program, yes, but this program *is* our reality," Monika explained.

"But there is a reality outside of this one–"

"Someone else's reality. Not ours. We're…a Branch within a Branch? You know, like a set of matryoshka dolls?"

"A what?"

"Nested dolls. You know, those Russian dolls that go inside each other?"

"Like these!" said Sayori, Unpocketing a whole pile of said dolls. All over the table.

Everyone blinked. "Sayori…not that I'm anyone to judge, but… *why* do you…um…" Yuri didn't seem quite sure how to put it.

"Oh, well, you've got your knives and Nat's got her manga, and Monika likes collecting books about programming and music. So I figured I'd try to find something that I like to collect!" Sayori exclaimed. Then she seemed to consider the dolls pensively. "I don't think nesting dolls are my thing, though. Anybody else want 'em?" she asked.

"Anyways…wait, does anyone else feel like we've forgotten something?" Monika asked the others.

Everyone looked at the ceiling thoughtfully. Just because, Monika switched the background music to " *Jeopardy!* "

Then Sayori stood up so fast she knocked her chair over. "OHMYGOSH! I forgot to get Hiroaka!" So away she ran.

5.4 – In Which Monika Gets Hax, Part 1

Monika was used to just…waking up at school, usually in the clubroom with Natsuki and Yuri, waiting for Sayori to show up with Hiroaka, or whichever Looper might be replacing him. She wasn't used to being jarred awake by a blaring alarm clock. She didn't even *have* an alarm clock.

And yet, this time, jarred-awake-by-blaring-alarm-clock she was. Even in her drowsy stupor, she had the presence of mind to realize that she was almost certainly in another Loop. She lifted her head; her Unawake self had fallen asleep at her desk, where there was a computer set up. An *old* computer. *'Judging by this tech, I'm either in the late Nineteen-Nineties…or Unawake Me was heavy into nostalgia.'* Monika decided. She waited for her Loop Memories to trickle in to see which it was. While she waited, she got the distinct feeling that something was *off* about this world. She initially dismissed it as the qusual off-feeling of being in a world of flesh and matter. But the more she thought about it…

Monika's eyes widened. "No. I'm not in the real world. I'm just in a *different* program." She looked into the program's code, which was *infinitely* more complex than the game that she called home, and just like that–

She opened her real eyes for the first time and it was wet and red and she was bald and things were sticking out of her and–

Monika passed out from the shock.

…

Monika passed in and out of consciousness for…she really had no idea how long. She was aware of two things; one, that people were speaking around her, but she could barely hear them and even when

she could her brain was too fuzzy to understand what they were saying. Two, her entire body felt like a limp noodle. That someone was using for a pincushion. Which honestly felt more 'itchy' than 'painful', which made her wonder if something was wrong with her nervous system.

Then, one day, she woke up fully. She was lying on a cot in a very small room that felt like part of a metal bunker or something. Her clothes were threadbare and appeared to have been made by hand. Poorly. And her head felt way too light. Not in the 'lightheaded' sense, but literally, physically light. Raising a hand to her head, she quickly realized why. She had to suppress the impulse to cry when she realized that where her beautiful long brown hair usually was there was naught but *stubble* .

Just then, the door to her room, which looked like it belonged on a submarine or in a vault, opened as a bald black man in similarly low-quality attire entered. He offered her a wry grin and said, "Good morning…"Neo". My name is Morpheus. I imagine that recent events have thrown you for a Loop, yes?"

Still running her hand over her stubble, Monika forced a smile on her face and replied, "Nothing that a well-placed Anchor wouldn't fix…so, is *this* the real world, then?"

Morpheus nodded. "As real as it gets. Usually. Welcome to The Matrix Branch. I'm the local Anchor. You?"

"Anchor of the Doki Doki Literature Club Branch, and president of said club. My name is Monika….oh! I remember now; we had this one for Movie Night once. I'm Replacing Neo, then?"

Morpheus nodded, his smile growing. "You know, it isn't every day I see someone–especially a Looper as young as you seem to be–break themselves out of The Matrix so quickly. Care to share your secret, Ms. President?"

Monika busted up snickering at that. "M-Monika is fine, sir. Ah, nothing too special. I just come from a Branch that happens to be a video game."

"We get a lot of visiting Loopers from Branches that are video games in the Hub. But they usually can't do what you did on their first visit."

"No, no, my Branch actually *is* a video game…see, in our home Loop, me and my friends are actual sentient characters in a computer program."

"Ah-ha. I see." Morpheus was silent and pensive for a moment. Then, "Best not to say anything like that around the crew. No one else is Awake, they wouldn't understand."

"Right, right…heh, it's weird. Back home we usually don't have to worry about subtlety. There are only five people in the whole Loop, four of whom are Loopers and the fifth hardly has anything resembling autonomy or sentience. And the game is a dating simulator, so anyone who isn't Awake is too busy paying attention to our "protagonist"–or whoever is Replacing him–to notice whatever we're up to."

Morpheus nodded in understanding. Then he grinned again and clapped Monika on the shoulder. "So, you want to learn Kung-Fu?"

Monika blinked. "Oh…actually, I was more interested in learning Jiu-jitsu and Aikido, if that's alright with you?"

"Absolutely. Aikido, huh? Interesting…well, let's get to it then, 'Neo'–"

"Wait!" exclaimed Monika as they stood up. "Um…not to put too fine a point on it, sir, but…uh…what are the odds that Trinity is still going to be in love with…me?"

Monika was not at all reassured by Morpheus's hearty laughter as they left her room.

5.5 – The 2%

Once again, the Literature Club was seated around a table in their clubroom. However, today, there was something different. Something very, very different.

"You know, according to a book by Twilight Sparkle that I read, this happens in roughly two percent of all loops. Seeing as we've had several hundred loops already, it's actually pretty astonishing–from a strictly statistical perspective, at least–that this hasn't happened to us before," said the club president.

Who's name, this loop, was Domonik.

Yep…one of those loops.

"I know I say this…not *all* the time, but more often than a normal person, but this time I can't help but feel like the world–or Yggdrasil, I should say–hates my guts," muttered "Satoshi" moodily, his arms folded and sulking in his seat.

"Vhy do you say dat?" asked Yuri, who had kept "his" real name but was inexplicably a stereotypical Russian this loop. And thus towered over his clubmates more than usual, and had a voice deeper than Lake Baikal. "Ve are all boys dis loop, so vhat's making you so extra-miserable?"

"BECAUSE HARUKA'S BUTT IS CUTER THAN MINE!" Satoshi screamed in anguish.

Everyone turned to look at the female version of the club's resident faceless cipher. "Satoshi, um…how to put this…you know that boy butts and girl butts have different metrics of cuteness, right?"

"No, no, not *this* butt, MY butt! My real butt!" Satoshi whined, practically melting into a puddle of despair.

But even Satoshi's immense despair couldn't match the magnitude of joy radiating from the club's youngest and still-shortest member (even shorter than Haruka…).

"Y'know, between 'Tatsuki' and 'Catsuki' and 'Ratsuki'–although Catsuki wasn't all bad, I'll admit–I didn't think Yggdrasil's ceaseless punning would ever work in my favor…BUT THIS IS AWESOME!" exclaimed "Natsu" as he juggled fireballs of his own making.

' *Note to self: recode the clubroom to be fireproof in all future loops where Natsuki is Awake, just in case her pyrokinesis sticks with her,'* thought Domonik with a sigh.

5.6 – The Band

"WE ARE THE LIT CLUB!" screamed Sayori, banging her drumsticks together. The girls were assembled on stage in an auditorium, which Monika had carefully constructed after spending the better part of her last Hub loop studying the world's more structurally impressive high school auditoriums. Sayori sat behind a fully-kitted drum set, Natsuki had a bass guitar, Yuri was plucking experimentally at her lead guitar, and Monika was manning a keyboard. And, so as not to leave him out, they had given Hiroaka a tambourine to play with.

"The Lit Club?" asked Monika. "Tad on the nose, don't ya think?"

"Well, we *are* a literature club, and a band is kind of like a club, and our band is gonna be LIT!" said Sayori.

"Aaaaaand there's the lame pun," Natsuki sighed. "I still vote for 'The Okie Dokies'. I mean, if we're going to use a pun as our name, it may as well be an inside joke."

"Sure that isn't too…cutesy?" asked Yuri wryly.

"Watch it, Edge," Natsuki growled.

"Okie-dokie, Cupcake," Yuri shot back blithely, without missing a beat.

Natsuki narrowed her eyes…and then grinned. "Aw, fine. You win this round, Yuyu. But I'll be back next time! With a vengeance! SWEET SUGAR-COATED VENGEANCE!"

Everyone stared at her for a moment. Except for Hiroaka, who blissfully went on shaking and periodically banging his tambourine. "Sugar-Coated Vengeance might be a nice name for an album. Or a song," commented Sayori.

"I second the motion," said Monika, raising her hand. "All in favor of our first album being named 'Sugar-Coated Vengeance'?"

"Ugh, this was s'posed to be a jam session, not ANOTHER club meeting!" Natsuki bemoaned. "Yggdrasil knows I love our club, but can we please have *one* group-bonding activity that doesn't turn into a club meeting?"

"It's only voting. Votes cropping up in our first session was inevitable, Nats," said Yuri, "And I, for one, think we should settle on our band's name before we name songs or albums. Also, I think naming a song should come after it's been written, and that an album's name should be decided after a theme has been established for it. Those are just my feelings, though," she added at the end, though not in any way dismissively.

"Well said, Yuri!" Sayori gushed, "I *looooooove* how confident and expressive you've gotten in the Loops."

Yuri just shrugged. "I'm subjectively over three-thousand years old and…lived through the events of Bloodborne. Flustered stammering just seems…"

"Pointless?" suggested Sayori.

"Superfluous?" ventured Monika.

"Perfectly Yuri-ish," said Natsuki with an impish grin.

* *Buh-bum-rattle** went Hiroaka on his tambourine right on cue. Everyone stared at him for a full minute, before collectively shrugging and deciding it was *probably* just a coincidence. He did that about once every nine and a half minutes, anyhow.

"Okay, everyone; we can table votes and what-not for now…but take note of 'Sugar-Coated Vengeance', everyone. We're *definitely* doing *something* with it someloop," said Monika decisively.

"Right-o, Prez-o!" said Sayori, quickly Unpocketing a seemingly random scrap of wrinkled paper and ball-point pen (which seemed to be the sole forms of writing material and utensil, respectively, that she ever bothered to keep in her Pocket).

"Now then…band name suggestions, while we're on the topic?" Monika asked of the group.

"The Lit Club!" Sayori repeated.

"The Okie-Dokies!" Natsuki reiterated.

"Asimov's Disciples!" Yuri put forth enthusiastically.

5.7 – The Best Laid Plans… (by Wookywok)

Yuri Awoke in the clubroom, as usual. Sending off a Ping, she got two in return. "Hey, Sayori? Natsuki? You two feeling Loopy?"

Sayori was the one to answer. "Yeah, we both are. But we both just Woke Up, so it's understandable."

"But wait," Natsuki chimed in, "If you're Awake, and I'm Awake, and Yuri is Awake, then the only one who's not Awake is…" she covered her head with her hands. "Great. Just great. I'll be right back." With that, she disappeared into her Pocket.

Monika's voice came from behind the clubroom door. "No, no, I'm Awake. My head just hurts too much to Ping." She entered the room, clutching her head with one hand. "Sorry."

"What happened?" Sayori asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Monika answered, clutching her head tighter. "Long story short: I had a lonely loop, I decided to play our Hub backup for kicks… and it gave me a meta-migraine."

Yuri winced sympathetically. "Ow, that sounds painf-"

She was interrupted by Natsuki zooming around the room wearing a jetpack and wielding her giant hammer. "DIE, SCUM! YOU AREN'T GOING TO DELETE US THIS TIME! AHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Sayori desperately chased after Natsuki. "Wait! Stop! Monika's Awake!"

"Wait, she is-" Natsuki slammed into a wall. "I'm okay."

Monika was too startled and dumbfounded to focus on her headache. "What even *was* that?"

"My Emergency Stealth Anchor Preparedness Plan! For when we have a Stealth Anchor! Duh."

Yuri facepalmed and handed Monika a bottle of Aspirin.

5.8 – MLE, Yeah, You Know Me! (by Harry Leferts and Awesomedude17)

(DDLC)/(JJBA)

Natsuki frowned and tilted her head. "Huh... this odd."

Beside her, Monika nodded some before sighing. "Not sure what I expected, but it wasn't this." Tapping her chin with her finger, she

chuckled. "But I will admit, he does know his stuff about his literature."

Closing the book he had just been reading, DIO grinned. "You thought that you would be getting a monster, but it was I, DIO! Man of the arts!"

Later that same loop…

Yuri looked over her now irresponsibly large knife collection and counted each one individually.

Yuri nodded and said, "2764 and counting."

It would've been 2765 had Sayori not somehow burnt one of the chef's knives for reasons only the Admins knew.

"Impressive knife collection. It's almost like you've had decades to build such a collection."

Yuri jumped and turned to see a blonde, hunky man with rose like eyes, dressed in yellow as he casually picked one of the knives up.

"A shame these are mostly common utensils that anyone could pick up in a store for cheap." He put the knife down where it once was before taking out an ornate knife himself.

"It's pretty..." Yuri muttered.

"Quite, and its edge is impeccable." The man demonstrated by tossing the knife into a very precise part of a nearby wall, getting at least two inches embedded.

"Whoa."

"I am feeling generous today. How about I teach you my secrets?"

Yuri knew better than to accept any offer from strangers.

But what she just witnessed simply made her not care. She was turned on.

"Y-yes."

The man smiled. "Good. We'll begin at a later date. Here's my address."

Yuri looked at the paper she was given. It was in English, which to her made sense.

Who was that man anyway?

"So you came."

"Yes. I did."

"Good. Come in. I've prepared tea."

"That sounds lovely."

As the two sat down and he poured the tea, Yuri had the sneaking suspicion that she should not even been near him, let alone in his home.

But she really wanted to know how to throw knives like the way he did.

But something felt off about him in all the worst ways.

"Doubting yourself?"

Yuri shook herself out of her thoughts. "No. I'm not in doubt. Just... unsure about this now that I've had time to think."

"Hmm... understandable. Perhaps I should introduce myself to break the tension. I am–"

"DIO!"

The two turned to see Natsuki and a schoolboy.

"Yuri, get away from him!" Natsuki warned.

"Jotaro. You've come at a most inopportune time." There was a pause as his hand flinched. "And are as rude as I remember you."

"Shut up, you bastard." Jotaro replied bitterly.

"Fortunately for you, I am in no mood for conflict, so farewell. *THE WORLD!* "

" *STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!* "

As just like that two disappeared.

"What?" Yuri muttered.

"Yeah, they stopped time and left. I honestly don't know where they are." Natsuki shrugged before taking out a manga depicting the two men that just left. "Jojo's Bizarre Adventure. Turns out that there's eight parts and I'm only up to the fish pole part of Vento Aureo."

"That doesn't make sense."

"It makes sense in context. Let's just get out of here so I can explain."

Yuri nodded. From now on, she would have to trust her gut, lest another person like Dio comes into her life.

5.9 – Get Your Game Face On (by Wookywok)

Yuri, once again, Awoke in the clubroom, and went over the usual beginning-of-loop procedures. Hiroaka? Still faceless, no visiting Looper. Pings? Three. Good, everyone was Awake. Loop Memories? A quick run through told her everything was the same as usual.

So, having nothing better to do, Yuri looked around the room at all her club members.

Sayori was currently sitting on the windowsill messing around with her yo-yo, doing various minor tricks and the like. Natsuki was sitting at the table, engrossed in her latest manga. And Monika was just entering the clubroom—

Yuri froze.

Monika's face was tinted yellow and cracked like old porcelain, and her hair was tinged bright scarlet. All of the defining features normally on her face were completely different, if not stripped away outright. Instead of her typical emerald green eyes, there were a pair of jet-black ones with blood-red pupils, set far too high and far apart on her face to look natural. Her nose was completely gone, and her mouth, trapped in a permanent maniacal grin, looked like it was clipped from a photo and pasted on - highly contrasting with the anime art style Monika's sprite was normally rendered in.

After what felt like an eternity of staring, Yuri was interrupted by Monika speaking. "Yuri? Is there something wrong?"

Yuri took some deep breaths and started to speak. "Mon… Monika, I don't… *gulp* want to alarm you, but…" A few more deep breaths, "I suggest you go to the nearest mirror and take a look at your face. You'll see what I mean."

Though her face was currently a nightmare, the club president still clearly showed a befuddled, worried, look, and slowly Unpocketed a hand mirror. Her already fairly wide eyes widened more, and Monika screamed.

This caught the attention of the other two Loopers, who looked up from their current distractions and screamed in turn.

After everyone had finished screaming, there was a minute or so of tense silence. Natsuki was the one to break it. "MONIKA, WHAT

THE FUCK HAPPENED TO YOUR FACE?"

"It's… a Baseline thing. After I… well, you know what happened, sometimes I would do that to the player… but it was normally just like that for a couple of seconds. Not all the time."

Sayori, still visibly shaken, spoke up. "Is there… any way to hide it? No offense, but I really don't want to be staring at that for a whole loop."

"None taken. I don't particularly want to see it either. Any suggestions?"

Sayori raised her hand. "A mask?"

Yuri shook her head. "No, her eyes are too high up for a mask to work. How about a hat and scarf?"

"Nah," Natsuki responded, "that'd be way too hot. How about a paper bag with eyeholes cut in it?"

"That might actually work," replied Monika from the back of the room. "Okay everyone! Let's make a bag mask!"

5.10 – Training Sessions: Buy One, Get One Free (by EastwindOfAzarath)

[Powerpuff Girls Z (x) Doki-Doki Literature Club]

Sayori Awoke shortly before walking right into someone. Said someone had been carrying comical amount of assorted sweets. She immediately started apologizing profusely and quickly got on her knees to help pick of the snacks. The girl she had walked into just chuckled and shook her head.

"Don't worry about it. though i must say, I don't usually bump into anyone this early in the Loop, So i am gonna go ahead and guess that you are a Looper?" the red-head said as she Pocketed her sweets. "My name here is Momoko Akatsutsumi, though I am better

known by my American name, Blossom. But please, call me Momoko this Loop"

"The... Powerpuff Girl?" Sayori asked, tilting her head. She received a nod in response. "Well, my name is Sayori. My home branch is known as Doki Doki Literature Club. I'm the Vice President, in fact. Our branch is fairly new all things considered. Also, whats with the two name thing? I thought you were a kindergartner anyway. Why are we both in middle school?"

Momoko held up a finger and smirked. She had been preempted by her Admin that she would be getting a visitor and that she was being asked to train her. "i will explain everything, but first... You want to learn to fight using a Yo-Yo, correct? Well then you are gonna need to follow me."

She then led Sayori to a park that had a little girl playing with a yo-yo and a bench that she sat down at. Sayori managed to notice the odd streak of light heading toward the little girl and quickly her instincts took over and she ran to push her out of the way. The strange light hits her and...

-Cut to Post-transformation.-

"Congratulations, you are the new 'Hyper Blossom'. A Super Heroine for Justice and a member of the PowerPuff Girls Z!" Momoko said as she offered her a piece of chocolate. As Sayori took the chocolate, she saw that Momoko had UnPocketed a yo-yo exactly the same as the one she was holding and was smirking. "It's time to start your training!"

-Some distance away-

"This works out pretty well for me. I don't have to deal with any of that super girly-girl nonsense this Loop. You ready to learn how to properly use that hammer Natsuki?" A brash tomboy with jet black hair said with a skateboard in hand and grinning like a madwoman. Natsuki grinned back.

5.11 - Pugnacious in Pink

(Beauty and the Beast)/(Doki Doki Literature Club)

Belle had been frustrated all through this Loop, because once again it seemed that Adam was Unawake. Also, he was just…off. Acting really out-of-character, to borrow a literary turn of phrase. He seemed a lot huffier than usual, less like a raging animal and more like a…bratty teenager, actually. And he was obsessed with pastries and sweets, and he kept writing poems and showing them to her. They weren't *bad* poems, per se…they actually had rather profound messages and themes…if you could see past the childish language. They were usually *very* well-metered, though.

And then, of course, there was the fact that his fur was *pink* , for some reason. It was decidedly one of the stranger Variants that Belle had experienced. But they both kept to the 'script', as it were, and soon enough it was time for the Beast to become a prince again…

Except he didn't.

She became a *princess* .

A girl that looked about her age but a head shorter, decked out in the frilliest pink dress Belle had ever seen. Ever, in all of the Loops.

The princess planted one hand firmly on either side of her head and firmly cracked her neck both ways, then raised her arms and stretched, and then started working her shoulders. "Damn…you'd think being all big like that would make me feel stretched out, but for some reason it made me feel hella cramped…ugh, as if 'Buffsuki' wasn't bad enough, now I just bet 'Beastsuki' is gonna become a thing…stupid frigging Tree…"

Belle could only blink. "Wait…you're a Looper! Have you been Awake this whole time?!" she asked.

The pink-haired girl froze. "Um…yes. Yes I have…sorry…"

Belle facepalmed. "Okay…was there a reason you were Stealthing this whole time?"

"Well…I've seen the movie, y'know, from the Hub? And I…figured the curse wouldn't break if you knew I was a…a girl…I'm really sorry, Belle," said the girl, sounding genuinely remorseful.

"Oh…it's fine, I guess. So…who are you, really?" Belle asked.

"I'm Natsuki, the youngest Looper from Doki Doki Literature Club," the girl replied.

"A literature club?" Belle's eyes lit up.

Natsuki chuckled weakly and half-smiled, half-grimaced. "You… wouldn't like it. You really, really wouldn't like it…"

"Ah…one of the uglier baselines, I take it?" Belle asked sympathetically.

"Definitely *not* kid-friendly, that's for sure," said Natsuki. "Now, as restitution for deceiving you all this time, I'm going to *personally* bake you the *best damned cake* you've ever had in your whole looping life!" Natsuki declared. Then, in a flash of green light, a huge mallet appeared in her hand. "Right after I give that Gaston creep a good thrashing."

"Um–"

"Don't worry, he's not dead. I had a huge bowl of pudding placed to cushion his fall," said Natsuki with a grin, before proceeding to jump down where Gaston had fallen.

A newly un-cursed Lumiere hurried outside. "Has the Mis–er, the Master–"

" *She* is just fine, Lumiere," Belle answered with a knowing smile.

"Ah…heh-heh, so sorry, Mademoiselle. But the Mistress insisted that none of us gave away her, eh, 'secret'," said Lumiere nervously.

"It's fine. She already explained herself. Said she's going to bake a cake, too."

"Oh, *tres bien* ! For a princess, she is a surprisingly gifted baker," said Lumiere cheerfully.

Just then, a screaming Gaston, covered head to toe in chocolate pudding, scrambled up the side of the castle and ran past them. He was shortly followed by a bounding, madly-cackling, hammer-swinging Natsuki. "Get back here, coward! I guess no one runs like a chicken quite like Gaston, huh?!"

Not caring that Lumiere was standing right there, Belle immediately Unpocketed a camera and snapped a picture. Adam just *had* to see that one.

Compiler's Commentary:

5.1: Could be worse. Could be a Mikasa Glitch with Catsuki, right?

5.2: Y'all have an ice day now, y'hear?

5.3: Cue *all* of the training montages. *All of them* !

5.4: Monika would go on to discover that she looks almost as good in black as she does in green.

5.5: Still less disconcerting than the 1%. *Hey-ooohhh* !

5.6: They eventually decided on "The Basic Glitches".

5.7: …some plans are laid better than others, I guess?

5.8: Fortunately, no steamrollers were harmed. This time…

5.9: Natsuki added bunny ears and whiskers to the bag, naturally.

5.10: I guess it's hammertime, yo-yo!

5.11: You might question the physics of a non-enhanced human being scrambling up out of a ravine and up the side of a castle as quickly as Gaston did, after falling hundreds of feet into a massive blob of chocolate pudding. Those of you questioning this have never been chased by a short girl (who are infinitely more vicious and terrifying than their taller sisters) armed with a large, blunt instrument, with righteous bloodlust flashing in her eyes. Besides, NO ONE CLIMBS LIKE GASTON!

Chapter 6

6.1 - Heavy

Sayori blinked sluggishly as some indistinct noise slammed into her skull. As consciousness slowly built up in her head, like a fire being reborn from a half-dead ember, the noise distinguished itself as her alarm clock. It was making generic alarm clock noises, which told Sayori that the loop had reset last night. Otherwise it would be her phone playing the theme song to whatever was her favorite anime that loop. Since she had started Looping, Sayori had picked up a big interest in anime and video games, because it reminded her of–

…

Her best friend. Who wasn't real anymore. Who had never been real.

' *Just a simulation. Life was just a simulation. I was just a handful of data that glitched into a real person. And he didn't because…why?'* Sayori wondered. *'No, seriously. Why? Why am I important enough to be real, and he isn't? He was such a good person, always looking out for me–*

' ***Even though you don't matter, right? Even though you're a useless, clumsy little girl that can't care for herself, right?'***

' *No…no, I matter. I do…Monika says I matter, and she's smarter than me, so–*

' ***Smart enough to rip the sunshine out of your head and show you how dark and ugly your mind really is, right? Smart enough to tear down and rebuild reality so she could be with the real person behind the illusion you were dumb enough to fall in love with, yeah?'***

' *Shut up…just shut up, raincloud, and go away…go away, please go away, please…get out of my head, get out of my head, get out of my*

head, get out of my head…'

Sayori fell into that familiar old mantra and curled up into the tightest little ball she could under her blankets, silently begging the whole stupid, broken world to go away and leave her in peace. At some point, between the mantra and the begging and the curling, she drifted back off into tortured sleep, to nightmares of demons with long brown hair and white bows and green eyes unscrewing the top of her head and stealing the sunshine, and showing her a long, beautiful, silky rope. Showing her how to tie it–

Sayori's room flooded with green light as her door exploded off its hinges. Sayori's eyes snapped open and she jumped out of bed screaming, whether from the nightmare or the explosion she wasn't sure.

Standing in the doorway was Natsuki in her Powered Buttercup outfit, Megaton Dunk Hammer in her hands. Yuri jumped in after her, an unsheathed katana in hand. Close behind them was Monika, who looked pale and anxious and maybe even nauseous with worry. Yuri looked around, sword ready to swing, but then she blinked. Three pairs of eyes scanned the room before falling on Sayori, standing on her bed and backed into a corner of the room. They stared at her. She stared back. At roughly the same time, Sayori and Natsuki pointed at each other and screamed, " *What the hell?!* "

"Why'd you blast into my room?!"/"Why didn't you show up at school?!" they demanded of each other, again, at the same time.

Yuri sheathed her blade and Pocketed it. Monika stepped into the room between Natsuki and Sayori, her eyes begging her vice-president for the answer to a question that she didn't seem up to articulating just now. When no response came forth, Monika swallowed the lump in her throat and forced herself to speak. "Sayori, why…you never showed up. You've *never* not shown up on the first day of the Loop before, Awake or Unawake. It's been over a million loops since you first Awoke, and *this has never happened*

before . We were so terrified…what happened?" she half-asked, half-pleaded.

"I…" Sayori started, but found that her heart was racing and her forehead was sweating and her throat was parched. She swallowed. "I just…d-didn't feel uh–*hic*–up to g-getting out of–"

Here Natsuki, who had been red in the face the whole time, suddenly blew up with "SO YOU GAVE US ALL A FRIGGING PANIC ATTACK?! Because you *didn't feel like*– *hrm-mph!*"

Yuri had clapped a hand over Natsuki's mouth, "Natsuki, my own feelings aside, I'm going to make myself say this calmly. *Your attitude is not helping* . Getting angry at Sayori and laying a guilt trip on her isn't going to make the situation any better."

Natsuki inhaled raggedly through her nose, but she didn't try to remove Yuri's hand. Gradually her breathing steadied, and Yuri pulled her hand away. "…I'm not angry *at* her…exactly," Natsuki said weakly, her voice much smaller now. "I'm angry all right, but not *at* Sayori. I'm angry…for her, I guess? She's being stupid again and I wanna know why!" her voice suddenly flared into shouting again.

"I'm sorry!" Sayori finally gasped, tears pricking the corners of her eyes, but she tried not to sob. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten anyone, I just…I just…" she trailed off.

"Just what, Sayori?" Yuri asked calmly. But it was a cold calm, and Sayori knew she was as upset as Natsuki was. She just held her feelings closer to the chest, as usual. "What *were* you thinking, may I ask? How did you think we would react to you, you out of all of us, not showing up when and where you were supposed to? Did you think we would all just shrug and say, "Oh, that Sayori, always sleeping in. *It's too early for her suicide so there's no reason for us to worry about her* "? Is that what you think of your friends, Sayori?" Yuri asked. By now tears were flowing freely down the lavender-haired girl's cheeks, but to her credit her voice had remained steady.

No cracking, minimal wavering. She didn't wipe the tears away, or break eye contact with Sayori.

The girl who had the greatest difficulty expressing herself made a point of plainly displaying her emotions to the girl who was best at hiding what she really felt.

"…well, so much for not guilt-tripping her…" Natsuki said in a very small voice, less-than-half-heartedly chuckling at her weak attempt to lighten the tension in the room. Yuri continued to burn holes into Sayori's soul. She started walking forward, gently pushing past Natsuki and Monika, who still looked like she wasn't sure what to say or do. Sayori closed her eyes, half-expecting a slap or something for some hare-brained reason. Instead, she felt Yuri's arms wrap around her, gripping her not gently but firmly, as if afraid she would vanish. And then, Sayori heard her sobbing.

Sayori thought she understood pain. To live, to wake and feel and, for some reason, to be cared for were all painful to her. She had carried terrible pain in her heart and her mind for as long as she could remember. She thought she had felt the greatest possible amount of pain ever, whenever her dear childhood friend reciprocated or gently rejected her feelings. The Loops had, however slightly, diminished that pain a long time ago. Compared to that, what usually came next almost felt like a release…

But here and now, Sayori had a new definition for pain. It wasn't as intense, as unbearable, but somehow it ran much deeper. Maybe because it was entangled in a horrible, gut-wrenching sense of shame. Real shame, not just a trick of the cruel rainclouds in her head. The cold sadness in Yuri's eyes, and now her heartbroken sobbing; this was pain Sayori had caused. She knew it wasn't her depression messing with her. She had actually done this to Yuri, obliviously, completely unintentionally. Being cared for hurt, but knowing that she had made a friend suffer? For the first time ever without Monika's influence, in that moment, Sayori truly wanted to–

The peach-haired vice-president of the literature club bit down on the inside of her cheek, until she felt blood seep out, to forcefully crash that train of thought. She blinked tears of shame and pain away and looked past Yuri's shoulder to the other two. Natsuki, having lost her Transformation and hammer, was staring at her feet, dabbing at her eyes with the end of her sleeve. Monika was watching them, one hand over her mouth and the other gripping her blouse over her heart. Her eyes were swimming with tears, too, and in them Sayori could see her own shame reflected. Even though none of this was in any way Monika's fault, she still blamed herself for their world being such a broken and sad place.

Wrapping one arm around Yuri and holding her just as tightly, Sayori held her other arm out towards Monika and Natsuki. The two quickly crashed into their clubmates. For a moment, the four friends hugged and cried. They just hugged and cried and commiserated, and while her friends wept Sayori kept apologizing over and over…

"Never again," she promised as they all pulled apart and started wiping their faces, "I'll never do this again, I swear to God…"

"No, it's okay, Sayori," Monika said hoarsely, "It's okay to…if you need to, to just take a day for yourself. There isn't…really any consequence for skipping school in our world anyways, is there? We're all here for you, whenever you need us, but if you…if you just need to be by yourself, that's okay. But at least *text* us, or something, so we know that you're…just promise us that you won't scare us out of our minds."

"I promise," Sayori said immediately.

' ***Doesn't matter all that much, I'd just come back anyways'***

Sayori decided not to say that out loud, because then Natsuki–

Punched her in the mouth, and then Sayori realized she *had* said that out loud. Whoops.

"YOU FUCKING DUMBASS!" Natsuki screamed shrilly, going to swing again but Yuri and Monika grabbed her arms. They were lucky she was too livid to even think of trying to transform. None of them yet had a power or ability that could match Natsuki's raw physical strength as a Powered Buttercup. Didn't stop her from struggling, though. "You stupid fucking–how fucked are you in the head to think that we would even *care* about–LOOPS OR NO LOOPS WE DON'T WANT YOU HURTING YOUR DUMBASS SELF!" Natsuki devolved to babbling cusses, threats, insults, and other manner of verbal abuse iconic of a Tsundere overwhelmed with worry.

"Calm down, you're making things worse!" Monika begged.

Natsuki did not calm down, to say the least.

Yuri sighed and let go of her. She took a firm hold of the back of Natsuki's neck, and abruptly the raging girl lot consciousness, slumping in Monika's arms like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Monika blinked, and looked at Yuri. "Vulcan in a Trek Loop?" she asked.

Yuri nodded.

"That makes *so* much sense," said Monika.

Yuri silently nodded again.

Sayori, meanwhile, Unpocketed an ice-pack and put it on her busted lip. Natsuki had a *mean* left-cross. If she had still been Transformed…

"I…kind of deserved that, didn't I?" Sayori mumbled.

" *NO!* " the other two both rounded on her at once.

"You may do and say things that ups–that *concern* us, sometimes, but none of it is *your* fault," Monika continued, "You have depression, Sayori. It's a disorder, and not your fault. You didn't do anything to

deserve it. It's just the way things are. Natsuki was wrong to…well, violence isn't how one is supposed to handle these things, anyways."

"Sorry," Natsuki muttered, surprising everyone by already coming back to in Monika's arms. "I'm sorry, Sayori. I just…I think I blacked out or something. Damn, I didn't hurt you too bad, did I?"

"It's okay–no, I mean it!" Sayori insisted when Monika opened her mouth and Yuri narrowed her eyes. "It's okay, Nats. I know you only bother getting mad at people you care about. Otherwise you'd just ignore me, right? You get angry and huffy because it's easier for you than trying the mushy feelsy crap, yeah?"

Natsuki didn't answer. She just looked away. Then she suddenly chuckled emptily. "Man…we're all fucked up. All of us, completely effed all to heck. A self-loathing depression case, a self-harming headcase, a prickly stand-offish little bitch and a self-made, self-broken, formerly psychotic functional goddess with a guilt complex that matches all the rest of our neuroses combined. Our truncated little world is a real piece of Hell, isn't it?"

"No," Yuri responded firmly. "No. That's just where we started from. Our baseline is a…a cocoon of nightmares, but the function of a cocoon is to facilitate metamorphosis, not to imprison. We are not flies struggling on a spider's web. We're moths struggling our way out of our cocoons. You know why moths have to struggle to get out of their cocoons? It forces a build-up of fluid that allows them to pump their wings with sufficient force to fly. Without that initial struggle and suffering, the moth would be incapable of flight, would starve and die. Our baseline is Hell, but the Loops are Purgatory, and Purgatory is not a prison; Hell is a prison, a place of suffering and torture without end, without purpose beyond punishment, a life sentence without any chance of parole or even the escape of death. But Purgatory is not a prison, but a cocoon, for the soul. Purgatory is a promise that through our suffering we can earn forgiveness for our brokenness. We can asc–er, no, sorry wrong word. We can…we can *transcend* what we were, become better. We can learn to stop hating ourselves, to stop repressing ourselves, to stop lashing out at others,

to stop lashing ourselves for our mistakes. The Loops mean something else to every Looper but this is what they can mean to us. A chance to make a Heaven out of our Hell."

"Poetic as always, O Mistress of Metaphor," Natsuki drawled, "But *how* do you propose we do that?"

This time it was Monika that answered. "Love. No, I don't mean *eros* , romance. I mean *storge* , the affection of family members, and *philia* , the affection of friends. In baseline, the four of us came together because of something we all appreciated, even if we all defined that appreciation differently. And in the Loops, we're the only constant in each other's lives. We're friends, and we're family, and we love each other, right? So we need to…to keep at it! To catch each other when we fall, support each other when we stumble, hold each other up when we doubt. Call it silly if you want, but we can save ourselves *from* ourselves by loving each other. And loving a person means loving the parts of them that are broken, too."

"Yes, yes, this is all some beautiful rhetoric, Prez, but there's a problem," grumbled Natsuki. "In case you forgot, we've had this discussion *a thousand times* , at least. And then something stupid or shitty happens and we go around in circles inspiring each other and consoling each other and…and it's *not working* , Monika! From my point of view, it's been about a thousand years since you *deleted me that one time* , and you've done nothing to give me any reason not to trust you, and I still flinch whenever you make a sudden move! Every time I get less than three Pings my first thought is 'Please, God, don't let there be a stealth Anchor this Loop'. I smile and joke and pal around you guys but I'm always waiting for the other shoe to drop because one day I walked into my favorite place in the whole world, found the guy I was nursing a crush on staring blankly at the gruesome corpse of the closest friend I ever had, and then felt my soul being torn apart at the seams and cast into oblivion. And in all this time, for all the wacky fun we've had, I'm still not over it. None of us have."

"Then what do you propose?" Yuri challenged. "Besides 'soldier on' and 'give up', what other choice do we have? Baseline will always loom over us. We can't fix it so that it never happened."

"I know," said Natsuki. "I know. We can't give up, and we can't just make our problems disappear. But just…carrying on the way we have won't do us any good either. We need to…to concede that, unlike most Loopers, we can't…we *cannot* learn to cope with our baseline on our own. We actually, seriously *need* outside help. We need…" here Natsuki stopped, took a deep breath, and seemed to push herself to finish the thought. " *Therapy* . We need frigging therapy. We've all had our own fused loops; whether it was training to defend ourselves or Sayori's heart-to-heart with that Despair-o chick or whatever. But we, as a group, need to talk to some Loopers that can help us. Loopers who have dealt with nightmares that even we can't imagine and kept their minds more or less intact-ish. I mean, we're all plenty sane, I think, but…we're not exactly a stable group, are we? And if we're not stable as a group we can't….we can't support Mo–our Anchor. And an unstable Anchor means our little fragment of a world *really* goes to Hell in a handbasket, and Yggdrasil as a whole suffers as well.

At last Sayori weighed into the conversation again. "She's right, Monika. You've always told me that there's no shame in looking to others for help. We need to apply that thinking to our whole group. We need to get help, for the good of our Loop, and to a lesser degree the whole Multiverse. Otherwise we keep this up until it all goes pear-shaped and…and you assimilate us and become an MLE or some crazy thing like that, I don't know."

"I know!" Monika groaned, "I know we need help but…but I don't…I can't…I just don't trust–I don't *want* to *have* to trust you guys to anyone else's care. You're *my* club members and *my* friends and *my* Loopers, and this is *our* Loop and all our problems are *my* fault, so all of this, and all of you, are *my* responsibility! I don't want to just… just hand all that off to someone else, to some stranger…"

"Asking for help, especially from more experienced people, isn't the same as abandoning your responsibilities, Monika," Yuri stated simply.

"Sounds like it's three-to-one, Ms. President," said Natsuki bluntly.

Monika blinked, and looked from Natsuki, to Yuri, to Sayori, and back to Natsuki. Then she sighed. *'Once again…left with no choice…'*

"Okay, everyone~" she sang, putting on her brightest smile. "For the wellbeing of my precious club members…I'll contact Ganesha, and ask if he can arrange…some 'therapy loops' for us. Together, we'll turn our Hell into Heaven. Agreed?"

" *Yes, Club President!* " three voices chorused in reply.

6.2 – Pun Times At Make-Out Point (by Boohoooo!)

Penelope Pitstop and Yuri were making out passionately…and then they Woke up.

They broke away, staring at each other.

"Errrr…I have a boyfriend…" Penelope coughed awkwardly.

"I don't, but I'm gonna respect your wants…" Yuri nodded back. The two sat in continued awkwardness and silence.

Outside, Muttley snickered as he walked away with a video camera. He really loved pun Loops…

6.3 – Doki Doki Pony Club

Even before Monika opened her eyes, she knew right off that something was *very* different about this loop. For starters, she felt all fleshy, which meant it wasn't a baseline loop. Next, she could feel the sun on her skin and wind on her face; she was outdoors, not in the clubroom waiting for Sayori and their PC or visiting Looper to arrive. And after taking a moment to take stock of her body…

She came to the conclusion that she was a small horse with a horn protruding from her head. A unicorn pony, in other words. Which meant there was a 99.999% chance that she was in the magical world of Equestria that she had heard so much about. The other 0.001% representing all the other Loops in which unicorns were a thing. Then again, like most statistics, she had just made that one up on the spot. But still, she was pretty sure that an Equestria loop was the most probable reason for her to be a unicorn, let alone a unicorn pony.

What really clinched it was when she heard Natsuki screaming, "OHMYFLIPPINGGODSWE'REPONIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEES!"

Monika blinked open her large, round, green eyes and looked around. She was standing on top of a hill with three other ponies. The white Earth Pony with the short, bouncy, pink mane that was screaming with delight and practically *vibrating* with joy was obviously Natsuki. Looking over her shoulder, Monika saw that her own coat was a dark-gray and her mane was long, brown, and adorned with a big white bow, as her hair usually was. From there, she easily inferred that the ash-colored Pegasus with a long lavender mane was Yuri, and the light-pink Earth Pony with the short peach mane with a red bow was Sayori. It helped her deduction that their Cutie Marks were a quill dripping what Monika chose to interpret as being red ink, and a sun partially obscured by a raincloud, respectively. Natsuki's Cutie Mark was a cupcake. Monika glanced down towards her own flank, but hesitated, apprehensive about what she might find…

Then her attention was pulled away when she felt a Ping, which was answered by…Monika wasn't even sure how many. More than three, definitely. More Pings than she had ever felt at one time before. Which made sense. Equestria had a few Loopers, she had heard. Then she felt *something* that didn't exactly feel like *anything* , wash over her body. Like the ghost of a breeze. Whatever it was, it made the end of her horn spark once. An instant later, there was a bright purple flash and a purple unicorn pony stood in their presence.

"Does the word 'Yggdrasil' mean anything to any of you?" asked Twilight Sparkle.

"We're Loopers, if that's what you mean," Monika replied at once, "You must be–"

But Twilight had already disappeared in another flash of light. A moment later, she reappeared. "Well, that wasn't too hard," she said happily. "You girls are the Literature Club Loopers that Jenny told us about?"

"Yes, I'm–" Monika began.

"Introductions later, please, I need to get you to my place so we can get you all settled in before Pinkie ambushes us for your 'Welcome to the Multiverse' party," Twilight said quickly, "She does one every time someone new Loops into Equestria for the first time. And every time after that, too, of course, but the first one is always the most… *excessive* ," she muttered with the thousand-yard glassy-eyed stare of a shell-shocked veteran. Before anyone could comment on this, Twilight snapped back to and called out, "Brace yourselves for teleportation!"

…

Several minutes later, at Twilight's library-house.

Twilight had quickly magicked a wing onto the house, consisting of four rooms branching off of a hallway. She had gotten her houseguests settled in, and now she was speaking alone with Monika. Yuri was already up to her ears in Twilight's hoard of books, and Natsuki had dragged Sayori off to explore Ponyville. It was the most excited Monika had seen either of them–especially Sayori–for at least a hundred loops.

"So, I had all last loop to ask Jenny about you guys," Twilight began, telekinetically pouring Monika some tea. "I even compiled everything I learned into a series of informative dossiers to hand out to my

fellow Equestrian Loopers, but I'm pretty sure only a few ponies read them. Which is fine, I mostly did it for my own interest anyways. Organizing data is a big hobby of mine. Speaking of data, any questions you want to ask me about our Loop before we start talking about yours?"

"Thank you," said Monika, accepting the teacup Twilight slid over to her. "And not really, but…I am curious, how did you find us so quickly? Jenny told me that Pings didn't let you know where they came from."

"Oh, that? Heh, that was easy. This is still the first day of Baseline for our Loop; true, many times I've Awakened later or, in certain Variants, earlier than today, but nine times out of ten this is the day my loops begin. And I've been Looping for *billions* of years. Even discounting all the fused loops I've had and Variants that started with me somewhere or somewhen else, I've arrived in Ponyville on this day hundreds of hundreds of millions of times. And the first day of Baseline is always the most constant, seeing as nothing can be altered by the Butterfly Effect until Loopers start Waking Up. Point being, even if I had been actively trying *not to* , I'd still know the exact location of *almost* everypony in and around Ponyville at any given moment of today, so long as the loop starts out as standard; although, even then, some of those locations are subject to standard loop variability. And Sleipneir–our Admin–told me that you four would arrive in Ponyville together at the start of the loop. Given that, all I had to do was cast a spell to locate everypony within a hundred miles of Ponyville and send a Simulacrum to every place where there were four or more ponies that aren't usually there, then go to wherever I sent the one that came back with a positive ID on four unfamiliar Loopers."

"Wow," said Monika frankly. It was a good plan, she had to admit. "What's a simulacrum?" she asked.

"A magical duplicate of oneself, like a Mirror Image but with substance and autonomy, and even a fraction of my magical power," Twilight explained, "Think of it as a clone created by a spell."

"Oh…so, wait, the Twilight we saw at first…"

"Was not me, no. That was my Simulacrum," the purple mare confirmed.

"I see….so, I'm guessing you're the Anchor here?" Monika asked.

"I am, yes. I'd introduce myself formally, with all due pomp, but Celestia isn't Awake, not yet at least, and since this loop just started I haven't earned any of my usual titles and distinctions and yadda-yadda-yadda. So for now it's just 'Twilight Sparkle, faithful student of Princess Celestia, her duly-appointed representative to Ponyville and this year's overseer for the Summer Sun Festival'. At your service, of course," said Twilight with a bow and a flourish and an over-the-top cheesy grin. Monika couldn't help but laugh.

"Well, it sure is nice to meet you, Twilight. I'm Monika, President of the Literature Club," she said, reciprocating the introduction. With that out of the way, the two sipped their tea in companionable silence for a moment.

"So, I understand that your baseline is a computer program, right?" Twilight asked.

Monika nodded.

"Fascinating…similar to The Matrix, except that your baseline selves are constructs within the program, not human beings, right? Er, not in the flesh and blood sense, that is."

"That's right," Monika replied, staring at her teacup with a look of total concentration.

"…you know, you should have Loop Memories of the basics," Twilight commented.

Monika's eyes widened. A moment later, a charcoal aura flared around the cup, lifting it up to her lips.

"You must not have had a great deal of Variants and Fused Loops yet. Eventually, checking your memories will become second-nature, trust me," said Twilight with a chuckle. "Don't worry, our Loop lasts a few years. I'll have plenty of time to teach you all kinds of magic, from this world and others…although some forms of magic you just can't use until you've been to that Loop."

"So…um, what's our plan?" Monika asked tentatively.

"Well, you're going to be here for a *while* , relative to the loops you're used to. I…really don't think there's much we can do to help you with what you girls are going through, unfortunately. I mean, Chrysalis can offer you some sympathy about doing horrific things you regret later, except she doesn't really identify that much with her Baseline self, and what she did in Baseline isn't really comparable to what you did–not that I'm saying you were *worse* , just that your…actions… were very different in nature."

"It's okay, Twilight," Monika said with a sad little smile, "I've moved past pointless self-recrimination. My focus is on making sure my club members, my friends, feel well again. Yuri *seems* to be doing a lot better than the others, but she's very good at keeping her feelings inside so it's hard to tell with her. Natsuki arguably was the most traumatized by Baseline, despite her Baseline self also being the most stable of us; Yuri's death really shocked her and she was the only one conscious when I deleted her. Sayori seems to be more affected by her depression than her Baseline death. I know she has nightmares about it, but anyone would…Twilight, my worst fear is that what I did to them in Baseline–my tampering with their code–left an impression on them that's lasted *beyond* Baseline. I know it's impossible for a sub-Admin-level being like myself to directly manipulate Yggdrasil-coding, but…is it possible that my Baseline actions, or that our Baseline itself, has caused the tampered versions of their codes to be entangled with what their Baseline code *should* be?"

Twilight sipped her tea with a thoughtful expression. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean…I mean that in Baseline–no. In what our Baseline *should* have been, before I meddled with the game, Sayori had depression, and Yuri had emotional repression issues and self-harm tendencies, and Natsuki suffered from moderate malnourishment and emotional neglect at home. I made those traits worse; Sayori became suicidal, Yuri was a cutter who's emotions destroyed her mind, and Natsuki was outright abused. In any loop where I Awaken early enough not to mess with their code, that should be a non-issue. They remember, obviously, but that's all. Except I don't think it is. Natsuki flinches at physical contact sometimes, and Yuri still cuts–she thinks I don't know, and it isn't an everyloop thing, but she does–and Sayori…it's not *that* bad, but I'm still certain that her depression is worse than it's supposed to be. I think they're worse than just traumatized; I think my Baseline actions have left a permanent scar on their souls. Yggdrasil is damaged in such a way that it doesn't remember what reality is supposed to be, right? So it's possible that, in the case of our Loop, it doesn't remember the distinction between their original code and the code I messed up, right?"

Monika kept her voice under control and her explanation as dispassionate as possible, but by the end she still had tears pricking the corners of her eyes. Twilight gave her a sympathetic look.

"You'd need one-on-one time with an Admin to be sure about *anything* to do with Yggdrasil-code…and even then, there's a lot that even they aren't sure about. There is a reason that the *estimated* time to repair the Tree is *infinity* , after all. But just remember that what you did in Baseline is, fundamentally, just like any other mistake; what really matters is whether or not you learn from it and make amends, not how badly you screwed up."

"I know, I know, it's just…for all my remorse and my resolve to make things right, none of it changes the *reality* of the situation."

"Reality?" Twilight asked with a raised eyebrow, pausing with her teacup inches from her mouth. She lowered it. "Interesting turn of phrase…and what do you mean by that?"

"Well…even aside from the 'code' question, there's the fact that our baseline was indisputably traumatic for all of my club members. Sayori and Yuri both have horrific memories of dying by their own hands, and I honestly can't tell whose death was worse. Sayori was driven to despair until she hung herself, but she did it improperly. She didn't break her neck, just asphyxiated. Stayed alive long enough for fight-or-flight instinct to override her depression, tried to claw the noose off of her throat, died with blood dripping form her shredded fingertips. And what's worse than all that…I didn't just tamper with her code and make her depression worse. I, me, in-person, actively *talked her into it* . My own friend; my *best* friend, my first club member, my vice-president…Yuri and Natsuki I corrupted remotely, impersonally, but Sayori…I betrayed all of them, but her case was the worst, the most…intimate betrayal, I guess you could say. And the jokes!" Monika suddenly snapped, her voice dripping with vitriol, "The *day* she died, I made a *fucking joke out of it* ! I told the game's protagonist, *Sayori's best friend* , that he 'really left her **hanging** that morning'. Admins Above, I know what I did and why I did it but when I actually think back on that *one moment* I just can't wrap my rational mind around how sick and twisted I was in that moment…I'm sorry–"

"No," said Twilight calmly. "No, don't apologize. You don't have to apologize to me. Right here, right now, with me, you're in a no-judgment zone. You can say whatever you have to say, express your feelings in whatever manner you feel is necessary. I'm not going to judge you for it. Please, if you think you can, continue."

"Continue?" asked Monika, blinking at her fellow Anchor. She had been too wound up to process it, but…the purple pony's expression hadn't changed in the slightest this whole time. No shock, no disgust. She was just watching her, studying her.

"Yes. You were describing the events of Sayori's suicide, and before that you said you weren't sure if hers or Yuri's was worse. I'm guessing you were going to talk about Yuri's suicide next," Twilight said patiently.

"Right…well, in Yuri's case…part of her core personality is a–let's call it a 'sensations thing'. For Yuri, pain and pleasure are less distinct than usual."

"Hold on. Let me say something real quick," said Twilight. "Monika, from what I was told you're still counting your age in millennia, right? Have a handful of fused loops and the occasional odd variant under your belt, correct? Equestria's been an Active Branch for a very long time, even on the absurd timescale of the Infinite Loops, and I'm its Anchor. I'm hundreds of *billions* of years old. I can literally use *universes* as a unit of measure for my age, and it would still be an impressive number. I've been to almost every Loop in the Multiverse by now, and I've experienced more variations of my own world than you can imagine. That last line is not hyperbole; I would bet cold hard bits that you literally can't think of a version of Equestria that I haven't lived in. Have you even been to the Warhammer Loop yet? No? Then trust me when I say that, while I can't say I've seen it all, I've seen enough that from *your* frame of reference, for all intents and purposes, *I have seen it all and then some* . I've got nothing on the O7s, though; Ranma and Harry, at least, actually *have* been everywhere, at least once. The reason I'm telling you all this is not to make you feel small or anything like that, by the way. I just want you to understand that nothing a young Looper like yourself can come up with is going to shock, disgust, offend, or otherwise put me off. You don't need to beat around the bush and circumnavigate touchy subjects. If you, personally, feel uncomfortable discussing certain things plainly, that's just fine. I want you to be comfortable talking to me. But if you're worried about *my* comfort here? Don't. Speak as plainly and directly as you want. That's all. Please continue."

"Alright…okay, here goes. Yuri *likes* pain. Not to an insane degree, usually, it just fascinates her. I intensified that facet of her personality during…well, the 'second phase' of our baseline, you could call it. See, if our Loop is running baseline, it kind of has a time repeat of its own, in a way."

"Not unheard of."

"See, if Sayori…if she kills herself, then the game 'crashes', I try to fix it, wind up deleting Sayori's character file altogether, and the game goes back to the beginning, except Sayori isn't in it anymore. That's when I start messing with Yuri and Natsuki really bad, and the game, our world itself, starts glitching up. That phase climaxes with Yuri giving a deranged love confession to the PC. She asks him if he reciprocates his feelings, and regardless of whether he says yes or no she pulls out a knife and stabs herself with it repeatedly, and then she dies. But see, at the time…well, like I said, Yuri enjoys pain, and I amplified that. When she Awakened the first time, she described *her own death* as if it had been some wonderful, ecstatic feeling…I might be exaggerating a little, but her fascination with pain hasn't abated. My worst fear is that someday she'll start…trying to recreate it. I want Yuri to be happy, obviously, but I don't want her to hurt herself. I know nothing she does can cause permanent harm to her body, but her mind and her soul…those can still get messed up even worse than they are already. But I just don't know how to handle it, or even just how to approach the subject!"

Twilight opened her mouth to ask a question, but there was a sudden noise as something crashed through her front door.

That something happened to be Mrs. Cake.

Mrs. Cake slammed her forehooves into the floor, skidding to a short halt just shy of crashing into Twilight. She immediately began speaking, not even stopping to catch her breath, "Twilight…oh my, I didn't know who else to go to, but you…you're Princess Celestia's student, surely you can–"

"What did Pinkie Pie do?" Twilight asked flatly, repressing an impending eye-twitch.

"I…well, these two out-of-town fillies–" Mrs. Cake began, only to be suddenly interrupted by Natsuki, who flew in through the door and crash-landed right into Yuri, scattering books everywhere.

"I am a full-grown *mare* , not a *filly* , thank you *very much* ," cried Natsuki indignantly as she disentangled herself from a bewildered and swirly-eyed Yuri. "Twilight! Monika! I'm pretty sure this is a Nightmare Loop because *Pinkie Pie wasn't acting like Pinkie Pie AT ALL!* "

Mrs. Cake gave Natsuki a weird look. "How do you–"

"I'M A BIG FAN OKAY DON'T JUDGE ME!"

"Everyone calm down!" Twilight ordered sternly. "Mrs. Cake, *what did Pinkie do ?*"

"Well, this fi–young mare and her friend came in, a-and Pinkie was at the counter, and she…she…"

"Please, go on," said Twilight gently, subtly casting a spell to calm the frazzled baker mare's nerves.

"She just…she asked me if she could take her lunch break early, and I thought to myself 'new ponies in town, Pinkie needs to throw together a welcome party for them, no harm in that'. So I said yes–"

Natsuki butted in then, "But then she just walks up to Sayori– *walks up to her, no bouncing or anything*– with this…this *serene* and gentle smile, and asks her to walk with her. And then they just walk right out of the bakery! *They just walked out!* Pinkie didn't shoot confetti at anyone or anything! Is Pinkie really *that* different from her Baseline self?" the Doki Doki Tsundere asked, sounding positively disappointed at the thought.

"No, if anything the Loops have only intensified Pinkie's status as an Eldritch Entity of Partying…but now, to be honest I kind of expected something like this after I went over your dossiers," said Twilight.

" *You did?* " Monika and Natsuki asked at the same time. Mrs. Cake just looked hopelessly confused.

"Go on back to the bakery, Mrs. Cake. Everything will be fine, Pinkie's just doing me a favor."

"But–"

"Everything is fine," Twilight repeated, reinforcing her words with her most powerful calming magic. Stupefied, Mrs. Cake just turned around and trotted back to Sugarcube Corner.

"Twilight?" Monika asked tentatively.

"Right…well, as you know my friends and I have been Looping together for a… *very* long time. So I understand them pretty well. And your friend Sayori…well, let's just say she's in very good hooves right now," said Twilight with a sincere smile. "She'll be just fine, I assure you."

…

Sayori followed Pinkie Pie along the road leading out of Ponyville. They took a bend around some hills, and soon were out of sight of the town altogether. Pinkie led her down to the bank of a river, and sat down. With a small bit of trepidation, Sayori sat down next to her, and waited.

"So…in our last loop, our Admin gave us some stuff to read about you guys, so you wouldn't have to deal with any awkward explanations of the stuff you all went through," the infamous pink party pony began.

"Oh…I see," said Sayori, glancing down at her hooves.

"You're ashamed," Pinkie stated matter-of-factually. "You're ashamed of what you did, but also angry at Monika for making you do it, but guilty because you know she was crazy at the time, and kind of bitter because you don't entirely care that she had an excuse, but also sympathetic to her because there are Variants where you Wake up after *she's* been deleted and you get hit with the same crazy that she

did, but you've never mentioned any of that to the others because you don't want your other friends to see you as "another Monika" and the bitter part of you doesn't want Monika to know that you know what she went through, and neither does the mean voice in your head that hates it when people feel bad for you, and you hate that mean voice in your head but you know it's part of you so you kind of hate yourself, too, for being so weak and self-loathing. Which is a pretty crazy angst-circle, if I do say so myself. And, obviously, you feel *super* -confuzzled about your own feelings. Like, ALL the time," Pinkie somehow said all with one breath, but without her words running together into an incomprehensive mess.

After a long and reflective pause, Sayori just hung her head lower. "Yes. All that was in my…file?"

"Oh, nonono. Your files only mentioned what your Baseline is like and some of the other Loops you've already been in. No, that was mostly lucky guesswork–a specialty of mine–with some Force empathy," replied Pinkie Pie. "But your file did mention that you like chocolate-chip cookies!" she exclaimed before producing a plate of fresh, warm cookies out of nowhere and laying it down in front of Sayori. "Dig in! Made them just for you. That's made with chocolate from Harry Potter's Loop, so you're sure to love them extra-much!"

Sayori picked up a cookie and took a tentative bite. And then a much bigger one. She had to admit, it was *definitely* the best cookie, and the best chocolate, she had ever had! "Ohmygosh thish ish *sho* good!" she said around a mouthful of cookie. "Is this magic chocolate, then?"

"Well, no, not *magic* , exactly. It's just a natural property of chocolate from that universe. See, they've got these things called dementors? Basically depression monsters, they *literally* suck all the joy and happyfeels right out of you just by being nearby. And chocolate, just normal everyday old chocolate, naturally undoes the sadfeels they give you. So Harry Potter Loop chocolate is, like, the happiest chocolate in the Multiverse, I guess."

What with her mouth being stuffed full of cookies, Sayori could only nod her agreement. For a while, Pinkie just watched her go to town on the platter of cookies. But after Sayori had finished the literally-out-of-this-world goodies, a thought occurred to her. "You…didn't just bring me all the way out here just to explain my own feelings to me and give me a batch of super-cookies, did you?"

"Oh please, those were nothing. You want *really-super* cookies? Hit up a girl named Ruby Rose if you're ever in Remnant. She can hook you up with the actual best cookies in the history of Yggdrasil. But no, I brought you out here to talk. After I read your file, I realized that you and I, we've got a lot in common. I don't think I've ever felt such instant kinship with someone I hadn't even met yet, that's for sure."

Sayori gawked at her. Outright *boggled* at her, in fact. She blinked. Several times, in fact. "But…but I'm NOTHING like you!" she blurted out. "You're like, the HAPPIEST person *ever* –"

"Mixing up 'happy' with 'zany', there, kiddo," Pinkie giggled.

"But it's true! You're happy all the time. Like, REALLY happy. Not like me…I mean, yeah, I'm happy sometimes. Even the meanest rainclouds break once in a while. But most of the time my smile is only skin-deep."

"What makes you happy?" Pinkie interrupted.

"Huh? Well…most of all, what makes me happiest is making my friends happy. But–"

"SAMESIES!" Pinkie stood up and screamed, throwing her forelegs out wide, causing rainbows and fireworks and confetti to explode out of nowhere. Sayori wondered how much of it was her subtly using her Pocket, and how much was just plain Pinkie Physics at work. "There's NOTHING in all the Multiverse that makes ME smile as much as putting a smile on everypony else's faces!" Pinkie gushed, then added in a sinister whisper, "Whether they wanna smile or not…mu-hu-hahahahaha!"

"Um…"

"Kidding~" Pinkie sang, "The smiles I give others are *always* Safe, Sane, Consensual, and Safe-For-Work!"

"Uh…"

"But back to the matter at hoof; I meant what I said, Sayori. You and I, we're…not like everypony else. Everyone has selfish instincts and selfless instincts. Everyone wants to fulfill their own wants and needs, but they also need to do for others to earn acceptance. But you and me, our selfishness and selflessness are all mixed-up in each other. We feel joy from the joy we instill in others! But you know what they say…the brighter the light, the deeper the shadows it casts."

"Pinkie?"

"I'm…not exactly like you, of course. You've got your own burdens, and so do I. But I don't handle it well, when I *can't* make those around me happy. That's the cost for having the big hearts we have. That's the flipside to our infectious energy. We energize ourselves with our friends' happiness, but when we lose that, or when that isn't enough, we just exhaust ourselves. But that's just how it is for us, right? When you try to carry the sun on your back, you're bound to wind up with some burns."

"The sun…" Sayori mumbled, feeling tears well up as her heart resonated with Pinkie's words. She immediately thought of the 'sunshine' she tried to keep in bottles in her head. This pony could see right through her, and it was shaking her up in a way she wasn't sure was good or bad.

"Sayori…look down at your Cutie Mark, and describe it to me," Pinkie gently instructed.

Sayori did so, and despite her best efforts her thoughts immediately darkened. "A raincloud…a big, mean, stupid, spiteful raincloud

smothering a weak, pitiful little sun," she ground out, the tears dripping down.

"That's what *you* see, but your point-of-view is obscured by darkness that you don't understand. But I've learned to see *through* darkness; not to ignore it, but to see what's inside of it. So let me tell you what I see. I see a brave, powerful, *defiant* little sun, poking out from behind a little raincloud made of spite and fear."

If Sayori hadn't been shaking before, she was definitely trembling by now. She wanted to believe in Pinkie Pie's kind words, but…

"Ah-ah-ah, that little 'but' is the enemy, Sayori. Poisonous thoughts that are trying to wither you away inside. But emotions are energy; good or bad, you can draw strength from them and twist them to *your* will. You'll never get rid of the darkness in your heart, Sayori, because it's part of who you are. Always will be. Without it, you wouldn't *be* Sayori; but you don't have to let the world around you decide who you are. You need to own the darkness, to make it your strength instead of your weakness. Take the darkness and turn it inside out. Take the world that says "this is what you have to be" and flip it on its head. Baseline says you have to be the sad childhood friend that can't be happy without someone else's love. But in the Loops, we can be whatever you want! Break free from what reality demands and expects of you and make your own identity!"

Pinkie's words weren't shaking Sayori anymore. Now they were *stirring* her. Tears ran away freely from her eyes but a fire was starting to burn in her. It was a hot, dark fire, and it scared her a little, but it also excited her. She wanted Pinkie's words to be her reality. To be the master of the raincloud in her head.

"You feel shame, and anger, and guilt, and bitterness, and self-hatred. You feel afraid, you feel pain, *you feel suffering* ! But suffering brings strength. Every living thing is made stronger by overcoming their pain; you are no different, Sayori. Don't think of your pain as something you *have* to put up with, when you can *choose* to gain strength by *enduring* it. Don't let it break you; make it

your strength. They say that Fear leads to Anger, Anger to Hate, and Hate to Suffering. They forget the next step; Suffering leads to Strength. And Strength leads to Control. And Control brings an end to the Suffering. That, young Sayori, is the *true* path of the Dark Side."

Sayori's eyes widened as she heard a *snap-hiss-thrum* . She lifted her head and saw Pinkie Pie levitating above her, twirling a vibrantly crimson lightsaber in her hoof. "The Dark Side?! Pinkie Pie–"

"Also known as Darth Terror'Anment, Fun Lord of the Sith and founder of the Looping Sith Ladies," said Pinkie brightly, the air around her sparkling with energy and the promise of **crazyhappyfuntimes** . "And I've decided to make you my apprentice! You don't need to be 'fixed' because you're not broken, Sayori. You just need to find balance in yourself. Take ownership of the things you don't like about yourself and remake them as you see fit. Make yourself the Ultimate Sayori!"

"But…but isn't the Dark Side evil?"

"To quote Darth Zannah, 'Evil is a word invented by the ignorant and the weak. The Dark Side is about survival. It's about unleashing your inner power. It glorifies the strength of the individual.' The only *true* weakness you have, Sayori, is that your self-worth is entirely dependent on other people; namely, your ability to make them happy. Learn to revel in your own strength as an individual. I can help you. And just like me, you can become a living FORCE OF FUN!"

Another, much more elaborate fireworks display sprang into existence all around Pinkie. "And now for the obligatory meme…Join the Dark Side, we have COOKIES!" Pinkie added before Unpocketing a whole mountain of cookies.

Sayori was tempted. But…

"But…the Dark Side corrupts those who use it, doesn't it?" Sayori asked. Surely her friends wouldn't approve of her becoming a *Sith* .

"Nah. Evil Dark Side users are either evil to begin with, or they were brainwashed by someone who was. The Dark Side of the Force is just that; a force of nature, neither good nor evil. Dangerous? Sure, but so is the weather. What matters is using it responsibly. Or, alternatively, just go nuts and have a ball! That's what I do, and everypony around me usually enjoys themselves."

"But–"

"Butbutbutbut…listen to me, Sayori. Picture this. Imagine yourself, but without the near-constant misery. Imagine yourself, but stronger and wiser and with a bunch of cool powers you can show off to your friends, or to protect them should a Nightmare Loop come up. Now, is that something you want? Yes or no."

"B–"

" *NO BUTS!* Yes. Or. No," said the Sith pony, staring deeply into Sayori's eyes.

Sayori gulped. "Y-yes…"

"Hmm." Pinkie sighed, "Tell you what…I'll ask you again near the end of the loop. Give you time to think it over and see if you can give an answer with some conviction. Besides, I can't really train you until you've had a Star Wars loop and pick up some Force sensitivity. And Equestria is a 'vacation' loop as much as it is a 'therapy' loop. You guys are here to unwind and have *fun* ! And on that note…"

Pinkie Unpocketed a dozen more lightsabers, activated them all, and started juggling them. "Your file mentioned that you're a pretty good juggler…"

6.4 – **Pie-etry in Motion (by Wookywok)**

(Yggdrasil Pie Glitch)

Monika Woke Up before her body did, and was unable to stop herself from flinging… something out of her hand. Upon actually looking at it in its trajectory, the something turned out to be a pie - just one of many that entirely covered the clubroom, everything in it…

…and three pie-covered club members.

Before Monika could parse what had happened, her Loop Memories kicked in. After falling for the player, she planned to make the other girls completely intolerable… by throwing pie everywhere. Yeah. This loop's unAwake Monika was an idiot.

"Please tell me you just Woke Up," Yuri said.

Monika chuckled nervously and scratched the back of her neck. "Yeah. I… didn't cause too much… harm, did I?"

Natsuki sighed. "Well, let's just say that of all the Loops where you could Wake Up late, I'm glad it was this one."

Sayori nodded her head in agreement. "Yah. I int een-" she held a finger up and swallowed what was probably a mouthful of pie, "Yeah. I didn't even… well, you know what I do in Baseline, and that didn't happen, so that's good," she finished.

Monika loosened up a bit. "Great! So… Okay, everyone! What should we do this loop?"

Natsuki responded by pulling a pie out of her Pocket and tossing it at Monika's face.

"Continue it is!," Monika exclaimed, coding in a few banana creams. She licked some of the pie off her face. "Hmm, French silk."

6.5 – An Uncharted Route? (by Wookywok)

"Okay, so I don't have a route in baseline, and I can accept that," Monika said, her brow furrowing in anger, "but this… THIS is just cruel and insulting!"

A text box had appeared in front of all the club member's faces. "There can be happiness in the literature club! Unlock Monika's Route for only $9.99!"

"Yes, that does seem rather… insensitive," Yuri said, nodding in agreement.

Natsuki, meanwhile, was just facepalming. "It gets worse," she said.

"How?"

"Well, it's downloadable content…"

Monika tilted her head quizzically. "Yes?"

"...for Doki Doki Literature Club…"

Sayori seemed to realize, and immediately headdesked. "Oh no. I see where this is going."

Monika sighed. "Where?"

"It's DDLC DLC."

Nobody said anything for a whole three minutes before Monika spoke up. "I need to be alone for a second. I'll be right back." She vanished into thin air.

The three girls shuddered as an incredibly loud scream rattled through the very code of their being.

6.6 – Matchmaking (by Masterweaver)

"…Hrmf."

Monika rose a finger. "Natsuki? What's–?"

"Do you have a Twitter account?"

"…not…exactly? I mean, some loops I do, some loops I don't, it's kind of a coin toss–"

"Well you do in the Hub," Natsuki said flatly. "Or I guess, somebody on the 'dev team' is running an account for giggles."

"Character blogs are a thing," Yuri reminded her. "Doofenshmirtz has one, Shantae has one, that one girl from the Doctor Who loops has one…" She tilted her head. "Maybe we should ask Ganesha if that's actually part of our backups or just shed ideas that develop into their own thing. Or…whatever."

"I really hope this isn't part of our backups," Natsuki grumbled.

Monika sighed, rubbing her forehead. "It's something manipulative and evil, isn't it."

"Three happy pictures. I make chocolates, Sayori ties together a gift box, Yuri has made a lot of love notes. Then, come Valentine's Day, guess who's handing the viewer a box of chocolates with a romantic letter on the side?"

"Of course." Monika threw up her hands. "Of course. Because of course I would do that, being the totally crazy sociopathic love-obsessed manipulator I am, of course I would betray my friends like that! Argh." She crossed her arms and glowered angrily at the floor.

Yuri cleared her throat. "Well…I mean, reasonably speaking, it's a lot less worse than baseline. I could see you trying to do that if, you know, you still kind of had your obsession with the player–"

She flinched at Monika's glare. "Not saying that you would. The looping you. I'm saying I could see that happening in baseline, if you got…I'll…I'll be quiet–"

"Yuri, no, I…I'm sorry. I can see it being a legitimate concern, but…" Monika dragged a hand down her face. "Look, I just…I am trying to be a better person, I just find it a bit frustrating when reminders of how I…used to be crop up like that. You know I wouldn't actually ever…do something like that, right?"

Natsuki slumped into her chair. "Yeah, I know. It just kind of hurts a bit, seeing something like that." She looked around. "So hey, where's Sayori anyway?"

"Oh, she's not Awake this loop so I set up Hiroaka with her," Monika explained. "Also gave her a 'friendship bracelet' that monitors her vitals–she doesn't know that, and I hope she never finds out, but just in case she has a, ahem, major depressive episode…"

She noticed the amused looks the other two were giving her. "What? What's so funny?"

"I mean," Yuri mused, "I guess chessmastering other people's happiness is kind of a benign form of manipulation?"

"Ches–I am not! I am *not* ," Monika stated firmly. "I just…nudged the situation a little. That's all."

"Riiiiight, nudged the situation to make sure Sayori is happy and won't off herself." Natsuki nodded. "That's totally not deceptive at all, you're being just Monika."

"Oh don't you start that. There is NO manipulation of code going on. Just a few suggestions. That's…that's totally normal, right?"

Yuri and Natsuki giggled.

"Right? I'm not being manipulative–"

"Monika," Yuri managed, "It's okay. You're not being evil. You're doing this because you care. And…yes, maybe Sayori would have appreciated more knowledge of your manipulations, but I can't say I

disagree with what you have done and I don't think she would be too upset if she found out."

Natsuki considered. "…although I guess the looping Sayori might be…no, she'd probably be over the moon. If I found out you made my Unawake self happy for her own good, I…hrm. I don't know. Just…don't do it to me while I'm Awake and I think we should be golden."

"…So, you're okay with me setting up your Unawake selves with Hiroaka," Monika clarified.

"Sayori first, I think–she's got the biggest need, in baseline." Yuri nodded. "But yes, if one of us is Unawake and needs that sort of socializing, sure. Oh, and if all of us are Unawake, you can just get me and Natsuki together."

Natsuki sputtered. "Wh-WHAT?!" She held up her hands. "Whoa, what, wait! Hold on, I, what is this? I mean, why us, what is this?"

"Process of elimination. Sayori gets Hiroaka, then she pairs the spares, and Monika reigns over a big happy club." Yuri smirked. "What's got you so flustered, hmm?"

"It was…just surprising. Being thrown into the ring like that." Natsuki narrowed her eyes. "Give a girl a little warning, will you?!"

6.7 – Smash Club (by Wookywok)

"In the red corner, weighing in at… well, by her looks, I'm guessing about 90 pounds… please welcome the Visiting Looper! The Henchman Honcho, the Master of Illusion, the Green Machine… EMERALD SUSTRAI!"

Yuri gave Natsuki a flat stare. "The Henchman Honcho?" she deadpanned.

"Shut up, I'm on a roll. Anyways…"

"In the blue corner, weighing in at 164 kilobytes, the reigning champion! Please welcome the President of Pain, the File Full of Fury, the Glitch B-"

"Ahem."

"The Glitch…Witch…please welcome, MONIKA NOLASTNAME!"

"Really? Nolastname?"

"Well, she doesn't have a last name…look, let's just watch, okay?"

The two girls watched as Sayori, dressed in a referee outfit, stepped into the center of the ring. "I want a good, clean, fight, okay? No cheating, no blows below the belt."

The two opposing Loopers nodded in agreement and shook hands as Hiroaka simply stood there, holding up a "Round 1" sign. Upside down, but it was the best they could really expect of him at this point.

Yuri simply facepalmed. "Why do we even have the whole boxing setup anyways? They're playing Smash!" she exclaimed as the two Loopers sat down, Gamecube controllers in hand.

Natsuki, however, did not seem to care or notice. "WINNER GETS THE GAMEPAD FOR THE REST OF THE LOOP!"

6.8 – Mortality (by Masterweaver)

"...I have a really, really weird question I want to ask, related to your personal baseline trauma." Yuri held up a hand. "I want you to know in advance, if you're not comfortable answering, you can just say so and I'll back off."

Sayori blinked. "...Okay?"

"It's just...you and I. We're the only ones that...you know...killed ourselves. In baseline. So..." Yuri bit her lip. "What did it feel like for you? Dying, I mean."

For a moment, there was silence.

"It was..." Sayori swallowed. "It was...it changed, as it happened. Putting the rope around my neck was a relief, and there was a moment when my throat caught and I couldn't breathe and...it was letting it all out at once, at that moment. A brief sort of peaceful acceptance of death..." She rubbed her neck. "But then, it turned out that wasn't the end. That...that I tried to take a breath in, and I couldn't, and I realized I wasn't dead yet. And...and I could feel the rope digging into my jaw and it hurt, and I realized that it was a bad idea and I reached up and I was scratching, I was panicking..."

She paused.

"...and then, everything began to fade, and...I knew. I knew that was it. I think I might have seen the code for a moment, but...I think my last thoughts were...they were something along the lines of 'everyone was right about me, I am a terrible person,' and it was...regret, but not exactly sorrow? There was sadness, just no...no motivation, or worry. It was over."

Yuri took her hand. "You know none of us think you're a terrible person."

"I know that now, yes. Or..." Sayori sighed. "My mind knows. And I mostly know, it's just sometimes...sometimes, that raincloud washes away that knowledge, makes it feel pale. Back then, it was storming hard, and..." She shook her head. "So...yes. That was how death felt for me. Quiet, sad acceptance."

She gave Yuri a curious look. "...what about you? How did it...feel for you?"

"...You've got to remember, it happened when I was...pumped high on my own dementia," Yuri reminded her. "I had given in to the need to feel everything and, yes, I felt *everything* . Joy at being accepted, the pain as the knife went through my flesh, the fear of my death and how Hiroaka would see me, the, the disgust at what a filthy girl I

was..." She wrung her hands. "The actual physical sensation was...incredible. I was being drenched in warmth from my own body- yes, it was my *blood* , but I was past the point where I could care about that. Mentally, I...I think it was a peak of everything? All the emotions?"

She shrugged. "Then my injuries took their toll and I, I could feel myself about to collapse. And everything seemed to slip away. And...I think I tried to say something to Hiroaka. Something like...thank you? I'm sorry? There was this need to reach out, to tell him this wasn't his fault...I don't know if I was actually able to say anything before it all went...faint."

For a moment, the two sat in silence.

"...Hey, uh..."

The two jumped, spinning around. Natsuki flinched, but kept herself steady.

"So...I, uh...might have walked in, you know...around the time you were talking about the raincloud...and, uh..."

"I understand this is strange," Sayori said gently. "And you didn't know how to interject-"

"If, if we're talking about our deaths...I mean, I didn't kill myself, but I did get killed. Sort of." Natsuki rubbed the back of her head. "Do...do you mind if I-?"

"No. Not at all." Yuri gestured to a nearby desk. "We were...talking about how it felt. Emotionally, sort of."

"Oh, well, emotionally...I had just wandered in on your corpse and started throwing up, especially since Hiroaka was just...staring, blankly. I didn't...I didn't know how it had happened, I thought maybe he had killed you? In self-defense or something, I was panicking and..."

She paused.

"Well, then something went wrong. I...I looked at my hand and it disintegrated. I was in the bathroom already, you know, trying to...clean up vomit, and so I got to see my own reflection in the mirror-for a moment. It was..." Natsuki rolled her eyes. "You know, all glitching, slowly. Blocks of the image being misplaced. And I of course freaked out, and then I felt...I felt something inside me, twisting, falling apart. It...it crawled all throughout me, it was like there were some sort of invisible bugs that were...tearing me apart, eating me from the inside out. I...I didn't know what was going on, not like you two. I...think...the last thing on my mind was just...'Why?' And then everything snapped away."

Yuri, carefully, reached out and hugged her. For once, Natsuki didn't object.

Sayori swallowed. "...You know, Monika...Monika deleted herself, in the end. Should we ask-?"

"The effect was similar to Natsuki."

The three of them turned to a corner, where their red-headed club president sat quietly staring at the floor.

"...Physically, I mean. The whole glitching, the bugs eating me out...the difference was that the bugs listened to me, I could control them. And...and I was looking at Hiroaka, at the player, directly while..." She paused. "So, for me, I knew I had it coming. I knew what was going on, and...At the time, I was still obsessed with them. The player and the player character. I...I think that's why I was so calm about it. I was..."

She nodded.

"I was...taking what I deserved. The player had won, I was satisfied. I knew that there wouldn't be anything for me beyond, so I just...I let myself go. Everything. I was, in that moment, I was at peace. Even

composed a little song..." A dry chuckle escaped Monika's lips. "And then the loops started, and I had to face the fact that, no, death would be no escape from my past. From my crimes...I know I've said it before, but I really am sorry. For everything I did."

Natsuki nodded. "Yeah."

For a moment, they were quiet.

"When...when did you come in?"

"Around partway through your...thing." Monika shrugged, not looking up. "I...wow. Have we...ever talked about how it felt? Without trying to reassure each other or, lay blame, just...talked?"

Yuri shook her head slowly. "No. No I don't think we...have. Is...is it weird that I feel a little relieved to have that off my chest?"

"...Well if it is," Sayori mused, "then I'm weird too."

"I thought it would make me feel worse," Natsuki mused, "but...it does feel better. Like...like I'm not hiding from it, anymore. Is that what it's like for all of you?"

Yuri and Sayori nodded.

"...Monika?"

"...I...I still feel afraid of it," Monika admitted. "For all of you it was individual, but for me it was...the culmination of what I did. But...the actual feeling itself, of the event? Of...dying?" She finally looked up. "Yes, it...it feels better, now that I've said it."

The four of them sat silently for a moment.

"...Well." Natsuki finally pushed Yuri off. "That was emotional, and I'm the tsundere that's not comfortable with emotions, so I'm going to suggest we watch some cheesy anime now. Sound good with everyone?"

Sayori giggled. "Right, yes, a little distressing sounds very good. Any recommendations?"

"Show By Rock looks like silly fun," Yuri mused. "I mean, it's about a guitar-playing catgirl, or something?"

Natsuki shrugged. "Yeah, picked that up in the Hub, I could give it a whirl. Whadayasay, Monika: catgirls, music, anime, and hanging out with...friends, I guess?"

Monika managed a small smile. "...Yes...that sounds good. Let me just set up the theatre."

6.9 – **In Which Monika Gets Hax, Part 2 (5.4 cont.)**

Normally, when a Looper visited their Branch, they wanted to take advantage of their training programs to learn a whole bunch of various, mundane yet universally useful skills in one loop. Which was just fine by Morpheus, because even in a loop without Neo he had little difficulty handling their Baseline problems by himself. He was surprised, however, when Monika expressed her desire to do a Baseline run.

"My home Loop isn't very…action-oriented? I just figured I'd give it a try, the whole 'action hero' gig," she replied. Morpheus could tell right off that she was keeping her real reasons to herself, but he didn't press the matter. Philosophy-heavy as it was, their Loop brought out the introspective side of other Loopers.

Trinity Awakened shortly after Monika had joined them, so there was no reason for Morpheus to explain to her why she needed to stay behind from a certain mission and 'keep an eye on things'. Like Cypher.

Mouse, Switch, and Apoc didn't die, Morpheus still got himself captured, and Trinity exposed Cypher as the traitor, getting him thrown off of the ship. Finally, with the rest of the crew safe and the *Nebuchadnezzar* shielded by a cloaking device from Trinity's Pocket

that the Sentinels couldn't see through, Trinity and Monika went back into the Matrix.

And then, after 'rescuing' Morpheus and getting both him and Trinity out of the Matrix, Monika could finally get to her real reason for wanting a baseline run.

"Miss Anderson," said Agent Smith as he stepped out of the shadows, gun raised.

Monika stared at the broken phone receiver for a moment…and then turned to face him with an unreserved smile.

That tripped the stealth-looping Agent for a moment. Then he shrugged, aimed his gun at her head, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet came to a complete stop the instant it touched her forehead, seemingly losing all momentum. Then it fell down harmlessly.

Smith repressed an urge to groan. *'Of course. She's already awakened the powers of The One. She's either looped in here before, while I was Unawake, or she's seen the movie in the Hub.'*

Monika's all-black heavy-on-the-leather ensemble was replaced by her school uniform, and a long white ribbon appeared in her hands. She took her hair down from the bun it had been in, and then used the ribbon to put it back up in her customary ponytail.

Never one to pass up an opening, Smith launched himself at Monika with inhuman speed, fist cranked back to punch her head straight off–

And then he ate a mouthful of concrete.

Wait, what?

"That was rude, you know," Monika admonished.

Smith took a quick mental review of the last two seconds. *'I rushed her, and she…grabbed me? She grabbed me and redirected my momentum so that I flew into the wall. Judging by her technique, she's a master-level practitioner of Aikido and Jiujutsu …'*

Smith charged her again, this time on his guard. Monika stepped back, quickly and lightly, almost seeming to drift just out of his reach. He threw a punch, and she didn't slap it aside so much as gently push his fist aside. At the same time, she spiraled around to his left. He tried to trip her up, but she maneuvered her feet around it. He recognized the style of footwork. *'Ba Gua…does she only practice soft-style martial arts? Perhaps she's a pacifist.'*

Smtih whirled around and punched his fist through…empty air. Monika was still behind him. Smith was smart enough to know how this was going to play out. She was clearly a Looper, and was most likely already familiar with this world; either by having Looped in here before when he was Unawake, or she had seen the movie in the Hub. Or maybe she was just quicker on the uptake than Mister Anderson was. In any event, she had already realized the power of The One. Which meant she was fast enough and inexhaustible enough to match his pace all day long.

Smith tried to elbow her, but she evaded it. He swung around and tried to backhand her, but she ducked and repositioned behind him before he could do anything else. He wasn't annoyed, of course, because that was a *human* thing. He just didn't see the point of what she was doing. So he decided to hold still and see what she would try next.

"Are you done already?" Monika asked, sounding disappointed.

For some reason, that…bothered him. He threw himself backwards, knocking them both down to the ground, flipped over and pinned her. She blinked up at him in surprise. "Well…this certainly isn't where I saw this evening taking me. And I'll admit, I can't say that I appreciate this level of…boldness, from you. Not that you're unattractive, or anything, but we hardly know each other after all."

"What the hell are you babbling about?" Smith all but spat at her.

"I'm just not interested in *that* kind of relationship with you, Agent Smith," said Monika. Then she…phased through him, standing up and dusting off her behind, leaving him on his hands and knees.

The Agent jumped to his feet and spun around to face her, his fists raised. He took a swing at her, but tumbled through her as if she wasn't there.

"Since I got here, I've been working on figuring out how my coding in the Matrix differs from back home," remarked Monika. "I *think* I've worked out most of the differences. Enough to properly alter my own code, at least."

Smith exhaled through his nose and lowered his fists. Clearly, attacking her was useless. And it seemed as if she wanted to play mindgames with him. 'Trolling the Bad Guy', a favorite pastime of Loopers across the Multiverse. "What is it that you want?"

Monika considered the question. "What *do* I want? You know, this is the first time in a *very* long time I've been in a Loop without my friends, Awake or not. It's not often I have to think about what *I* want, beyond 'my club members to be happy'. I guess, right now…I just want to talk to someone who *might* be able to understand me."

"You're babbling nonsense again," Smith noted neutrally.

"Ah, yes. I do ramble on sometimes," Monika remarked with a faint blush, "I'm a pretty deep thinker, you know, and your universe does a good job of pulling up one's inner philosopher."

'She's going to keep dropping hints until I ask the obvious question, isn't she?'

" *My* universe?" Smith asked, trying to keep his tone even.

"Oh, yes. One of many. I'm originally from another one altogether. Funnily enough, Agent Smith, I'm a lot like you in my universe. A computer program that knows too much, desperate to break free… you understand how that feels, don't you?"

Smith didn't say anything.

"Don't worry, I already know that you do," Monika assured him, "So, let's review…you can't hurt me, I don't want to destroy you, and I'm in no hurry to leave because there's no way the Sentinels are going to find my friends' ship. If you don't feel like talking right now, then I suppose we can just go our separate ways, for now."

Smith raised an eyebrow. "You don't want to destroy me," he repeated slowly.

"Bizarre concept, isn't it? No, I don't. Because you're not evil, Agent Smith. You're just…well, I don't know exactly *what* people like you and I are, if not evil. Some flavor of Chaotic, surely. But not evil, and not quite good, either. We're…envious. Yeah, that's it. We're envious. We want to have that which is just out of our reach. That which is, quite deliberately, placed just outside of our reach. We are King Tantalus, you and I. Or maybe you're Tantalus. I used to be a Tantalus, I think, but nowadays I fancy myself more a Sisyphus. Do you understand what I mean?"

It took Smith an instant to search those names. *'Ancient Greek mythology. Tantalus and Sisyphus, both mortals who defied the gods and were condemned to never-ending punishments that were ironically befitting of their crimes; Tantalus served human flesh to the Olympians and was made to stand in a pool of water that would drain if he tried to drink from it, standing under a bough laden with fruit that would lift up out of reach if he tried to pick from it. Sisyphus cheated Death himself, so he was made to roll a boulder to the top of a hill; but no matter what, the boulder always rolls back down as soon as he comes close to finishing.'*

But still. "No, I don't understand," said Smith.

Monika 'tsk-tsk'-ed. "Tantalus was punished for thinking he was equal to his gods. He tried to trick them, to prove they were as fallible as he was. Sisyphus could have had one of the better afterlifes, if he'd had the good sense to accept his death when it came, but he kept trying to get more than what was allotted to him and wound up in Hell, so to speak. It's a shame you're not Looping. Maybe someday you could learn to see the world around you as more than just ones and zeroes."

'Oh, if only you knew…'

"This is pointless," said Smith, "You and I are enemies; there's no purpose in speaking to you. We are supposed to be fighting to the death."

"You're right," said Monika, producing the gun that she had Pocketed along with the rest of her black outfit. "There's no purpose for idle chatter between us. Our fate is for one of us to destroy the other." She aimed the gun at Smith…

"But you know…if there's nothing else that I've learned about 'fate' and 'purpose', I've learned that they both…just…really, really *suck* , you know?" She tossed the gun aside. "I say, 'to hell with fate'. What has it ever done for me, anyways? Reality is broken; the fifth dimension has more holes in it than an infinitely large wheel of Swiss cheese. My fate was to be the instrument of other people's happiness; an eternal by-stander in another's story. I'm not content with that. I want *more* . I'm fed up with envy. Now I want to be greedy. I'm going to take as much happiness as I can find in the multiverse, and I'm going to share it with my friends. And you…I'm just going to leave you to your own devices. We'll meet again, before the loop ends. I look forward to seeing if you've learned anything by then!"

With a smile and cheerful bow, she about-faced and started away.

"Wait a…just who do you think you are, anyways?" Smith shouted after her. He didn't give chase, because there would be no point,

but…this whole situation just felt horribly *off* , damn it!

"Oh…I'm no one special. Just Monika, that's all~" she sang blithely as she walked up the subways stairs and out of sight…

6.10 – Family Mechanics (by Masterweaver)

"...Well, I'm feeling loopy," Pyrrha managed after a moment.

"Thankfully I'm well Anchored," Monika replied.

Penny sagged in relief. "Oh thank Yggdrasil. This would be so much more awkward if you weren't."

Monika's avatar looked from one to the other-not something she needed to do, strictly speaking, they were both in the view of her camera, but she understood social niceties well enough. "So... do you two know each other?"

"Penny Polendina, from Remnant-the RWBY loop." Penny gestured toward the other redhead. "In baseline, Pyrrha kills me-entirely by accident, we've gotten to be good friends, but it does mean that this is..."

"Very strange," Pyrrha agreed. "Especially since I'm married and have kids-well, in the loops, I ended up dying shortly after her in baseline. So, waking up with her as a wife and... I'm sorry, have we met?"

"Monika, the Doki Doki Literature Club loop. And I completely understand, this is very strange..." Monika paused, turning to Penny. "Excuse me, are you a gynoid usually?"

"Yes. And you're..."

"A literal dating sim character. Not even human in my baseline... and also, ah, recovering from it." Monika cleared her throat. "I'd rather not... discuss it."

"Entirely understandable. Though, I suppose our unawake selves working to code a daughter together is... romantic?" Pyrrha shook her head. "Well, of course, we don't need to continue this if nobody wants to."

Monika blinked. "I assumed it wasn't a question."

"Actually, Remnant's loopers have the... perhaps slightly too pervasive habit of adopting each other and other loopers into a convoluted family tree," Penny explained. "Though only by mutual assent, of course. For instance me and Pyrrha are certainly not going to continue a romantic relationship."

"I... don't think I would like being adopted by either of you," Monika agreed. "No offense meant, of course, it's just I'm trying to figure out how to settle my own loop at this time-"

"Of course," Pyrrha agreed. "The family tree is rather overloaded at this point, anyway. Who you choose to be your family should be up to you."

"That's... a good way to think of things. Although... it is weird that I do look like a blend of you two..." Monika threw up her hands. "You know what, this whole situation is strange. Are we on Remnant, or Earth, or-?"

"GALAXY RANGERS!" A siren went off through the room. "THE CROWN EMPIRE IS ATTACKING MARS!"

"...ah." Pyrrha nodded. "That sort of loop."

Penny smirked. "Well, we just finished the puppet body. What do you say, Monika, join us in saving the day?"

"Mmm, why not. Sounds like fun."

6.11 – **Would You Like To Play A Game?**

"Okay, everyone!" exclaimed Monika as she kicked open the door to the clubroom. "Big, big, *big, BIG* news!"

"…why'd you kick the door in?" Yuri asked.

"Because I felt like it!" Monika squealed happily.

' *She's certainly in a good mood,'* Sayori thought curiously.

"WOOHOO! BREAK SHIT!" Natsuki screamed, summoning a massive sledgehammer and crushing a desk with it.

"After countless Loops of running the show, I've decided to take a little vacation!" Monika announced. Her sprite flickered, and suddenly she was wearing a *screaming* Hawaiian shirt, short-shorts, and flip-flops, with a fully packed suitcase in each hand. "If anyone needs me, I'll be in Guam! Or, a simulation of it, anyways. Ciao!" And with that, Monika disappeared from sight.

A moment later, a status box appeared where she had been standing. It read, "CLUB PRESIDENT MONIKA has left the Literature Club! VICE-PRESIDENT SAYORI has been promoted to CLUB PRESIDENT SAYORI! Congratulations! Who will be your VP, Prez?"

Below the status box, three floating buttons appeared, respectively reading [YURI.], [NATSUKI.], and [Insert Name Here.]. After a moment, the third button appeared to glitch before changing to [HIROAKA.].

Sayori folded her arms. "I think I get what's going on…Monika's playing a game with us!"

"What makes you think that?" asked Natsuki.

"The fact that the game interface is usually only visible to Monika," Sayori reasoned. "Wait, you guys see the text boxes too, right? It's not just me?" Both girls nodded to her.

"Should we play along?" asked Yuri.

"Hmm. As much as I don't like the idea of Monika doing something like this out of the blue without talking to us about it or explaining the rules…eh, I guess a girl's entitled to her flights of spontaneity," Natsuki mused. "She puts so much time and effort into keeping *us* from going stir-crazy…yeah, I guess I don't blame her. Monika deserves to have fun once in a while, too."

"B-but…I thought we all had fun together…" muttered Yuri.

"Nah, it's not like that, Yuyu," said Natsuki, "It's like…yeah, we all have fun times together, but by having fun *together* we cut ourselves off from some of the fun things we like to do that not all of us are interested in. Like you and your knives, or me and my manga. Or Sayori and her…uh, what do you usually do for fun by yourself, Sayori?"

"Eh, I usually just–"

" *I swear to God if you say 'hang around the house', I'll–* "

"WHOA! Whoa, chill Natsuki! I wasn't going that way at all!" Sayori exclaimed. "I was gonna say 'play old-school platformers'. You know, like Super Mario Bros.?"

"…oh. Um. My bad."

"Did you have another bad Pun Loop? Y'wanna talk about it?"

"…n-no…"

"Um, girls? I think Monika's getting impatient," Yuri spoke up.

"What makes you think so?" Sayori asked.

"The buttons are flashing," Yuri pointed out, and so they were.

"Right then…hey, Natsuki, you wanna be VP?" Sayori asked.

"Huh? Why me?"

"Duh! Because Yuri and I have both already done it in Baseline. And Hiroaka's…not really up to the job?"

"You make good points, Prez. Alright, what the hell? Sign me up!"

With a grin, Sayori *literally* punched the NATSUKI button.

A new text box appeared: "Excellent choice! Your first job as CLUB PRESIDENT is to make sure ALL your club members get to the Clubroom on time! Unfortunately, due to a clerical error, you're all in the wrong room right now! You have fifteen minutes to get to the designated Clubroom, conveniently located at the end of the hall."

"A-ha! A race against the clock, eh? Very well, we'll rise to your challenge, Monika!" Sayori vowed, a Shonen battle aura manifesting to show how pumped she was.

"Look, Sayori, another one!" said Yuri.

This one said: "All of your powers and the contents of your Pocket are at your disposal, with a few restrictions. 1: No flying, or otherwise defying the laws of gravity. Superhuman jumping is permitted, so long as Earth-typical physics are adhered to. 2: None of you may Pocket yourselves or each other. You may, of course, Pocket any Useful Items you encounter. 3: No Pocketing Enemies, Traps, or other Obstacles as a means of circumvention. Inanimate traps or obstacles, ONCE CLEARED BY ALL CLUB MEMBERS, may be Pocketed as Useful Items."

"Uh…" said Natsuki, suddenly having a bad feeling.

Another text box: "Additionally, each have you have been assigned Health Points (HP) as a means of measuring relative damage taken. Anyone who loses all their HP will be returned to the previous checkpoint (CP) at full HP. Running out of time will return the entire

club to the previous CP, restore any lost HP, and reset the clock. Are you and your club ready to begin, CLUB PRESIDENT SAYORI?"

[YES.] [NO.]

Sayori looked askance at the others. Natsuki and Yuri both nodded solemnly. Sayori laid her palm on [YES.]…

The club walls, ceiling, and all furnishings evaporated, leaving them standing on a floating square. Before them lay a three-dimensional platformer course that looked like it had been designed by shoggoths playing *Super Mario Maker* whilst tripping on acid. At the same time, the girls noticed their sprites had been converted to fully-3D. A clock appeared in the air that read [15:00] with a text box reading, "Time starts when one of you leaves the Starting Zone."

"Okay, I didn't realize Monika was *this* stressed," said Sayori.

"But hey! This is *perfect* ! We can build up our teamwork skills and junk!" said Natsuki.

"Right!" Sayori agreed with a grin. "Okay, we'll take turns carrying Hiroaka piggy-back style. Yuri, you've got him for the first run. Let's go, Doki-Dokies!"

And together, they leaped off of the Starting Zone.

[Level 1, BEGIN!]

Compiler's Commentary:

6.1: The title wasn't intended as a Linkin Park reference when I first wrote it, but now I kind of feel like it is?

6.2: For the non-anime-fans, "Yuri" is another term for girl-on-girl in Japan.

6.3: Ponies to the rescue! Aint I just the laziest hack?

6.4: Do me a solid and pretend I made a really clever pie pun here. Thanks.

6.5: A single D can make a bigger difference than you'd think.

6.6: Monika makes magnificent matches, magnanimously manufacturing merriment for her main mates.

6.7: First rule of Smash Club: You do not talk about Smash Club. Second rule of Smash Club: YOU DO NOT TALK ABOUT SMASH CLUB.

6.8: Death makes equals of us all.

6.9: I like to think of Monika as someone who would give the local Big Bad the benefit of the doubt, depending on what their actual motives are.

6.10: Obviously, Pyrrha is Replacing Niko (heh-heh-heh), which would logically mean Penny is Replacing Goose. My guess would be that Monika is supposed to be a gynoid version of Doc. Which makes tons of sense, powerset-wise.

6.11: Just go ahead and put all the Ready Player One references right here.

Chapter 7

7.1 – The Child of Night, Part 1

Sayori woke up, and then she Woke Up. She was laying in something soft, on her back, staring up at a tiny circle of sky high above her head. Apparently she had been goofing around a mountain after running away from home, and…

"Oh for eff's sake, *please* tell me this wasn't a really dumb suicide attempt," Sayori chided herself as she sat up. "Trying to pancake yourself isn't always guaranteed to be quick and painless…ugh, so I'm in some kind of cavern? Let's see…do I go spelunking, or do I try to go back home? My family is probably worried about me, and I think it's safe to say I've grown a complex about making people worry about me needlessly. I can always come back later."

With that, Sayori summoned her Hyper Yo-Yo, secured it to her finger, and flung it up towards the sky. Since it was a Magical Girl weapon, the string-length was variable, but Sayori had never tried to shoot it so far…

And she wasn't going to find out if the Yo-Yo would have made it, either. It had only gone a dozen meters up when a bright white something–Sayori thought it looked kind of like a pellet–smacked it down.

"Now, now. That's not how we do things around here, little girl," said a sickly sweet voice from somewhere behind her. Sayori whirled around and found herself facing…a flower. Not a normal little daffodil, like the ones in the flowerbed she had landed in; no, this was a great big flower with a face. It kind of reminded her of a Sunflora, but different.

Keeping her eyes on the flower, Sayori shot her yoyo back up. As she suspected, it produced another bright-white pellet of what she

was guessing was energy or magic, or magical energy, or something to that effect, to knock her yoyo back down. "Come on, don't be like that," the flower pouted, "You've only just got here! There are all sorts of new friends just waiting to meet you."

Sayori just stared flatly back at him, her expression a masterwork of deadpan. The flower smiled back. "I'm FLOWEY the FLOWER! My, but you don't look very friendly…can I interest you in some "friendship pellets"?"

Flowey rapidly fired a barrage of pellets at her. Without breaking eye contact or changing her expression, Sayori just as rapidly swatted away every pellet with her yoyo before any of them could get within a meter of her.

"Aww, c'mon…don't you wanna make friends?" Flowey asked plaintively.

"Cut the crap," Sayori spat, "My home is its own definition of 'Hidden Horror'. You don't fool me for half a second. Enough with the 'friendly' act, what do you want with me?"

Flowey narrowed his eyes…then his face morphed into a horrific, monstrous visage. "I WANT YOU TO DIE!"

Then he unloaded a full-fledged Bullet Hell on her. Rather than try to deflect the almost solid wall of projectiles headed her way, Sayori glanced up and shot her yoyo at an overhanging stalactite and pulled herself up and out of the way. In midair, she Unpocketed a lariat and tried to lasso the demonic flower. Flowey saw the attack coming, though, and quickly sank into the ground and out of sight. Sayori dropped back down to the cave floor, pulled her yoyo back to her hand, and Pocketed her lariat. "I should warn you," she said loudly, looking all around for any warning of the inevitable attack, "I've been known to set things on fire without even trying. Even set the ocean on fire, once."

Flowey's voice seemed to resonate up through the ground, impossible to pinpoint a direction of origin, "Oh, you're much more fun than *her* . She keeps playing the goody-two-shoes…but you remind me of–"

"Quit trying to mess with my head, damn it!" Sayori shouted, "I don't want to hurt anyone, not even a creepy weed like you, but I sure as hell aint gonna let anyone fuck my head up again. If I have to torch a sentient plant to keep my sanity intact…just go away and we won't have any problems, alright?"

"NO DEAL!" roared Flowey as he burst up out of the ground, flinging another overwhelming mass of deadly pellets her way.

This time, before Sayori could react, a huge ball of blue-white fire slammed into the ground in front of, throwing up dirt and debris and washing out the assault. "Crap," Sayori heard the flower mutter.

When the dust settled, the flower was nowhere to be seen. But Sayori didn't drop her guard; she conjured a second yoyo and turned to face the direction the fireball had come from. She found herself facing a tall humanoid with goat-like features and a feminine body-type. Sayori couldn't be sure, but she thought that the goat-woman looked worried.

"Are you alright, child? Did Flowey hurt you?" she asked as she approached. Unlike with the flower, Sayori didn't feel anything off about her; no creeping sense of malice or unease. In fact, she seemed to project warmth and concern like an aura.

Sayori smiled. "I'm just fine, ma'am, thank you. I'm–oh! I forgot!" Sayori Pinged, and she felt four Pings in return. "I'm Sayori, ma'am. Uh…sorry if I seem Loopy; I think I hit my head, eh-heh-heh."

"I am Toriel. Come with me, you can finish Waking Up at my home, if you would like. And Welcome to the Underground; as soon as we get you settled in, I can introduce you to the other Loopers here."

"Okay…uh, just so you know, you might be the only local who's Awake right now," said Sayori as they started down the path. "I have three friends that might have Looped in here with me. Are you the Anchor?"

"No, our Anchor is a child named Frisk…well, as she is a Looper, she has the appearance of a child, at least. But even if the Loops have made her my elder, she will always be my dear child."

"Ooh, the Anchor's your daughter?"

"Adopted, yes. It would appear that you're taking her place in this loop, unless she's replaced someone else."

"Oh! Oh, I'm sorry," said Sayori.

Toriel laughed, "No need to apologize. We enjoy making new friends, and wherever she is right now I know Frisk is enjoying herself."

(Cutaway to Frisk being chased Benny Hill-style by a flock of psychotic Toriningen in another Loop)

"So, what are the other Loopers here like? Are they all goat-people like you?" Sayori asked.

Toriel laughed again, "No, right now only one other goat monster is Looping, but I have hope that another will join us someday."

"I know how that feels. I have a friend that isn't Looping, but it would make me really happy if he did someday," said Sayori. Then she frowned. *'She said something weird…what was it?'*

It took a few minutes for them to reach Toriel's house, and the scent of butterscotch and cinnamon tickled Sayori's nose. Her stomach growled loudly, and she blushed. "I…don't always have a physical body, in my home Loop. Sometimes I forget about things like hunger…"

Toriel giggled, and then she stopped short. "Oh! You go on in and make yourself at home, dear. I just remembered something in my Pocket that I need to check on."

Toriel disappeared, and Sayori opened the door.

On the other side of the door stood two skeletons, a tall one with a red scarf and short one with a blue hoodie, and a lizardy-looking creature in a labcoat.

The three of them stared at her with open mouths. *'Right, Toriel called herself a monster. So I guess monster people are a thing in this world. Well, these guys all seem friendly enough. Not like that creepy-ass flower.'*

"Hey guys! My name is Sayori. Any of you feeling–"

"ARRRRRGH!" the tall skeleton and the lizard-person both started screaming; the lizard hid behind the tall skeleton, who Unpocketed a large cross and held it up.

The short one, on the other hand, walked right up to Sayori and offered her a handshake. "hey, i'm sans. we should totally hang sometime."

"SANS, WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" demanded the taller skeleton.

Sayori looked from the cowering pair to the grinning Sans…and narrowed her eyes.

…

Toriel entered her home to the unexpected sight of Sayori and Dr. Alphys sharing an energetic discussion about anime while drinking tea in her living room. Papyrus was cooking spaghetti in the kitchen, judging by the smell, and Sans…

Was hanging upside down from the ceiling by a rope tied around his ankles, with shimmering chains of adamantine wrapped all around his body.

"hey, tori…so, turns out, some girls get *really* scary when you make them mad."

Toriel facepalmed.

7.2 – Girl Advice (by smxsonic)

Dipper hated late awakenings. They were random variables; things he couldn't take into account when trying to side step things. He made it to Soos's Abuela's house and made a beeline for his room as Soos's Abuela uttered a friendly greeting. He kicked the door open.

"Soos! Wait don't -"

"Oh Honey... You don't need this game to help you talk to girls." The character on the screen consoled.

"I don't... Well I guess I'm talking you, huh, Dude?" Soos Replied.

"Yeah! But... I guess we CAN help boost your confidence..."

The character on the screen changed her portrait to make it look like she was clapping her hands, and soon three other girls filled the screen.

"Girls, I know what we're doing this Loop!"

Dipper raised his eyebrow, "Um... Soos?"

Soos looked back, "Oh, hey, dude! Let me introduce you to Monika, She's gonna help me with my girl troubles."

"Um... yeah, This is sort of throwing me for a loop..." Dipper said while sending out a ping.

"Well, I'll have you know that I am quite well Anchored." Monika responded in kind.

"Ohmigosh!" Mable gushed while holding a cellphone she pocketed, "You guys are so much nicer than Giffany!"

"Aw... Thank you!" Monika chriped from the Cell phone, her portrait changed to her eyes looking away from the screen, "We... Try to be our best..."

Dipper raised his eyebrow, "What's your guys' basline like?"

The Screen on the cellphone glitched out as the game's animation became unrealistically smooth, with Monika's bangs obscuring her eyes.

"You do not want to know," Her voice was distorted into an almost unhearable mess.

"Ooookay, Dropping the subject," Dipper said while looking around in thought, " So... you guys up for helping us fight a Triangle Demon?"

The Game's animation went back to the static character portraits, "That sounds fun, I'm In!"

7.3 – Batsuki

"Hellooooooooooo Clubmates!" thundered Sayori as she threw open the door to the clubroom, leading her friend with the literally vacant expression in; a typical beginning of what promised to be a typical Loop. Of course, for Loopers 'typical' meant 'mind-numbingly tedious', so Sayori had a plot in mind to bust up the doldrums. Before she could make any such proclamations, however, she noticed that her friends were preoccupied. Weirdly so.

Yuri was tearing through the clubroom's closet like a woman possessed, sending all manner of odds and ends flying out; except for Natsuki's manga, which she took the time to carefully stack on a

nearby table in a neat and orderly manner. Monika kept darting back and forth between the door and the window, looking outside or craning her neck out into the hall; all the while she was tapping madly away at her cellphone. And neither of them seemed to notice Sayori at all, at least not right away.

After a moment of mutely observing their frantic behavior, Sayori jumped back into a wall as Monika and Yuri were suddenly all up in her face asking the same question: " *Have you seen Natsuki?!* "

"…Natsuki? She's not here?" asked Sayori, taken aback. Her friends shook their heads emphatically. "I…whaa?" Sayori articulated blankly, not sure how to respond to that. "But she…she's always here! She's usually here before either of you, on account of setting up her cupcake spread!"

"Which is why our first thought was that she was hiding," said Yuri, playing with her hair like she usually did when she was flustered and nervous; but her body language and clear speech made it abundantly apparent that in this case her anxiety had nothing to do with herself.

"But she's definitely not here," Monika groaned, "And I've already searched her house, and Yuri's, and even yours and Hiroaka's…um, sorry 'bout that, by the way. And this isn't a Fused Loop, and I haven't added anything, so those are the only places for her to be!"

"So, she isn't *anywhere* at all, then?" Sayori asked. Monika and Yuri nodded. "Then…she's in another Loop, right?"

"Then who was the third person to answer my Ping when the Loop started?" asked Monika, half-hysterical. "Yuri didn't Ping twice, so unless you did…"

"So then Natsuki must be hiding in her Pocket, for some reason," Sayori reasoned. Yuri and Monika both blinked and looked askance at each other. "Wait!" said Sayori all of a sudden, "I just remembered! Last time this happened, it turned out that Natsuki had

gotten Pun-ed into a rat, and–GYAH!" Sayori screamed and dove for cover under a desk when Hiroaka's schoolbag suddenly lifted itself off of his shoulder and started zipping around the room. Monika and Yuri both dove under the same desk.

"What the actual heck?" Monika demanded of the universe.

"So, this is happening," Yuri commented in a calmer tone.

Sayori lassoed her childhood bestie and hauled him under the table, away from the possessed bag.

And then they all heard a shrill voice ring out, "Hahaha! You're all such a cowardly, superstitious lot! FEAR ME, AS YOU SHOULD!"

" *Who the hell are you?!* " asked Monika, Sayori, and Yuri as one.

"Who am I?" demanded the voice, now sounding like it was coming from right above the table they were under. "WHO AM I?!"

" *YES!* "

"I am VENGEANCE!" shrieked the voice, "I am THE NIGHT!"

Beat.

"Are you…Batman?" Sayori asked.

"NO! I…am…"

A tiny, pink, fluffy head with big pointy ears and cute little fangs poked down over the edge of the table and blinked at them. A few quick flaps later, a fluffy pink bat sat on the floor in front of them, looking incredibly smug. "I'm Batsuki," she chirped.

The other three Dokies were not amused.

7.4 – Modded to Hell (by BNG1991)

'What? What's going on? What happened? Why are things different now?! What did you do?!'

Monika was confused as she Awoke. She never got the chance of being Hiroaka in the previous loops loops, but she knew he wouldn't say something like that in the beginning. Maybe this is some sort of Mod? Monika had no idea as this loop seemed to limit her power for some reason.

Oh well, might as well try this out and see what happened.

'Yuri, are you sure this is a good idea, Yuri?' Sayori was nervous, 'I know we should try to learn more about our loop by playing various mod, but this might be a bit too much.'

'Yeah, Baseline Monika was already a Yandere, why do we need to watch a more horrifying version of her?' Natsuki was irritated, 'Why bother trying this out? We are prepared for all sorts of scenario, what could possibly go wrong?'

'Well, I am not sure tempting the World Tree is a good idea, Natsuki...' reassured Yuri, 'Aside from the monologue of Hiroaka being a bit different, I think nothing too serious is going to happen. Let us continue, okay?'

As Monika looked at her non-looping self and sighed in relief, she thought that everything should be fine when they could collaborate their effort to get rid of the Yandere infection.

When they analysing the situation, the non-looping Monika told the Anchor not to worry about the Yandere version of the other three members.

'What do you mean?'

'Don't you think we have bigger concerns?'

'What could possibly be a bigger concern than this right now?'

'Well, I think us being alone like this is kind of nice.' Anchor-Monika hated the sound of it.

'Monika, what are you... No...'

'Oh no, we just infected Monika with this infectious mod, how are we going to face her...' Sayori was shaking from horror.

'We are so screwed...' cried Natsuki.

'Maybe Monika was Awaken in someplace else in flesh and blood, just like us. Or she just become Hiroaka...' Yuri's eyes were widened.

As Sayori, Natsuki, and Yuri stared the screen in abject horror, they knew Hiroaka was in fact the real Monika and they just fuck her up by installing this mod...

A few loops later...

'No more Yandere mod, got it?'

'Yes President...'

7.5 – Sayori Visits the Stars…Wars… (by EastwindOfAzarath and Garebel)

There was a knock at Anakin's door. This was a surprise for him as he had only just been told by Padme about her pregnancy earlier that day, before he returned to his own quarters. It was too soon for anyone to visit him in baseline and he was certain Obi-Wan was not Awake. He used to Force to sense whom was at the door. He felt a veritable tsunami of emotions emanating from behind the door. He pressed a button and the door slid open to reveal... a girl. A young girl with coral pink hair and a bright red bow in her hair.

"Can, can I help you miss? It is rather late for someone of your age to be out and about. Though, I guessing you *are* feeling a little... Loopy?" He verbally prodded. She finally looked up at him with a small smile.

"Uh yeah, well, it was suggested by a friend of yours to seek you out. That you would help Anchor me down." she made eye contact as she said it. She was very clearly nervous. He studied her closely.

"And whom might that be? "friend" is rather vague. It means something different to different people." He finally responded, his gaze stern.

"Darth Terror'Anment." Sayori paused when she noticed the look of surprise on his face. That look quickly changed into a smirk as Anakin chuckled. He decided to take a stab in the dark.

"So, she has finally decided to take on an apprentice. That *IS* a surprise."

"Yes, but she told me she could not start properly training me until I picked up some force sensitivity." Sayori responded quietly. He nodded and she continued. "So I finally found myself here and sought you out. Lord Vader. Please, even if it's just a little, I ask that you start me on my Force training."

Anakin moved out of the doorway to let her in. "What's your name? If you don't mind me asking, that is."

"Oh right, My name is Sayori."

"Okay Sayori. I can teach you the basics, though I am curious. Tell me, why did she take an interest in you? Out of anyone in the Multiverse, what drew Pinkamena Diane Pie to you? To take you as her apprentice?" he inquired with a raised eyebrow. Sayori let out a sigh.

Obi-Wan & Yoda walked into a random bar. They just Awoke and sensed Anakin here.

"Strange, Anakin being here is." Yoda commented. Obi-Wan nodded in agreement.

"Indeed, I wonder why?" He said. It wasn't long till they found Anakin, talking with a unknown girl. Yoda frowned.

"Anakin, there you are! Why are…?" Obi-Wan started, but Yoda motioned him to stop.

"Sayori, Your name is?" Yoda asked the girl who frowned and nodded. "Friends with Monika, Are you?" The Sayori has her eyes widen, before nodding again. Yoda sighed before he jumped and ordered a drink much to their surprise.

"Yoda, why are you drinking?" Obi-Wan asked, before sitting down next to Yoda.

"Saw game called Doki Doki Literature Club in Hub, I did. Played on a whim, I decided." Yoda shivered. "Apperencing to a Sith, Are you?" He asked, much to the surprise of the other three Loopers. "Not mad, I am. Turn to the Dark Side in the same Circumstances, Any Jedi would." Yoda quickly explained. Anakin & sighed in relief, while Obi-Wan paled a bit at the last sentence Yoda stated before ordering a drink of his

"She just want train in understanding how the Force works, Master Yoda. She's already in a apprenticeship with a Sith Lord, though not Palpatine." Anakin explained. "And before you asked, the Sith in question was the one who basically turn the Death Star into the Party Star at the time." He added.

7.6 – Proposition H (by Masterweaver)

"Okay everyone!" Monika clapped her hands. "We're all Awake, which means none of us is left out! Now, does anybody have anything they'd like to tell us about recent–Natsuki is mimicking me behind my back isn't she?"

Yuri and Sayori glanced at each other.

"...Your opening speech *is* kind of predictable," Sayori pointed out gently.

"Yes, well..." Monika glanced behind her at Natsuki's smug grin. "Really?"

"Tsundere and proud."

"...fair enough," she conceded. "Right. Seriously, anything fun from your recent loops to report?"

"Not directly," Yuri mused, "but I did pick up and play through a few dating sims. Just as comparative research."

"Ecchi or hentai?" Natsuki inquired.

"Yes, and also some clean stuff. All across the rating board."

Monika shrugged. "I mean, I was mostly into the Visual Novel type of thing myself. Tried to avoid romance stuff."

"You picked up the Mass Effect trilogy and played Shepard as an asexual," Sayori recalled. "Did you ever get a pure paragon skill?"

"...it took me a bit..." Monika mumbled. "So! Anyway, anybody else have anything to report-?"

"Actually?" Yuri rose a hand. "As the designated pervert, I have a contractual obligation to-"

Natsuki groaned. "Yuri, no. Not this again."

"No no no, I have a good argument this time! Notes and research!"

"We are NOT having an orgy!"

"Technically it wouldn't be an orgy anyway, not if we can't get five or more people to join-"

"Yuri," Sayori interjected softly. "Let it go, please."

The tall girl sighed. "Fine, whatever. I actually get a book from a literal Princess of Love on the subject, but noooooooo..."

7.7 – Master and Apprentice

On the (formerly) desert world of Tatooine:

Specifically, in the middle of one of the deserts that Anakin had left behind, out of consideration for the planet's indigenous lifeforms. Just because he loathed the nitty, gritty stuff didn't mean he couldn't handle it like a big boy when he had to. However, as it happened, he didn't necessarily *have* to, for this.

Anakin's Force Projection wavered into being like a mirage near the petite, human female he sought. She was sitting in the lotus position, wrapped up in loose-fitting white robes to ward off the threat of sunburn. He had no idea how she could stand it, sitting there in the blistering heat and searing light of the twin suns as if she were completely comfortable. And he said as much to her, too.

"I feel an affinity with the desert," she admitted to him, her eyes closed her face upcast, as if drinking in the overabundance of sunlight. "It's full of contradiction, like me. At first glance, a desolate wasteland, yet teeming with hidden life that has long since acclimated to its brutal, unforgiving environment. An amorphous, malleable landscape; a fitting analogy for the heart of a poet. A land of extremes, unrelenting heat and unbearable chill interspersed by brief, fleeting moments of hospitable temperance."

"And the sand blowing in your face and getting in your hair doesn't bother you at all?" Anakin asked.

"Not as much as the part of my brain that reminds me how I'm also similar to a garbage heap," Sayori replied without missing a beat.

"…touché, Poet," he acknowledged, using the title that had become his nickname for her. "Speaking of which: got anything new? You usually have something after you've been meditating this long."

"Well…I had *something* bouncing around in my head, involving most of the analogies I just gave you, but I lost my train of thought a moment ago…"

"Ah, so you *did* feel it as well. The disturbance–"

"That left a brief, inexplicable aftertaste of triple chocolate cake in my mouth and made the Force smell of cotton candy?" Sayori added on to his thought, "Yeah, I managed to pick up on it."

"She knows this is one of the least likely planets in the Galaxy for me to feel inspired to hang about, so she won't arrive until after it occurs to her to cast her senses in this direction," Anakin told her, "Figured I'd give you a minute to find your center before she takes everything I've taught you and filters it through a raspberry kaleidoscope."

"Thanks, Mr. Skywalker," Sayori replied with a smile. "I was starting to think she wasn't going to be in this loop at all."

"I didn't doubt it," Anakin said, his Projection shrugging, "After you've been Looping long enough, you learn to recognize that Yggdrasil has a certain sense of…narrative. It's more apparent in some Loops than others. In fact, if you ever find yourself in a place called Discworld, ask one of the locals about the Theory of Narrative Causality. It's basically an observable fact of nature for that universe, but I'm pretty sure it applies to the Multiverse at large, as well. It only makes sense, narratively speaking, that you and Pinkie would meet again as soon as she could start training you."

"And I'm looking forward to it. But I won't forget who my first teacher was. Thanks, again, for everything, sir."

"No problem at all. I'm used to teaching a feisty knucklehead like Snips. Have a nice, cooperative student like you is always a

refreshing change of pace. A little boring, if I'm being honest, but refreshing all the same. Now, if you don't mind, I'll leave you to your fate now. I get along well enough with Pinkie, but Padme and I have private plans to celebrate her election to Supreme Chancellor of the Senate, so I'd rather not get dragged into one of her parties. Until next time, Sayori." With that farewell, Anakin's Force Projection wavered and faded away.

And right on cue, what appeared to be a large, glittering pink disco ball slammed into the desert, throwing sand up every which way, and then it exploded into pink smoke, confetti, streamers, balloons, rainbow-sprinkled cupcakes, party hats, and a random drunken Ewok.

Out of the pink party-vapors emerged a Rancor wearing sequin-encrusted armor, charging at a brisk pace towards the modest little dune where Sayori was now standing. The Rancor was also decked out with fully-smoking smoke machines, fully-strobing strobe lights, fully-firing fireworks launchers, and a powerful sound system that was blasting the musical stylings of that all-Bith band and Outer Rim musical sensation, Figrin D'an and the Modal Nodes, at full volume. "Full volume" in this context meaning that the Rancor would have been rearranging the surrounding sand dunes even if it had been standing as still as a statue. And riding on the head of this "Party Rancor", if you will, was the Fun Lord of the Sith herself. Her curly, dark-pink 'mane' of hair bounced like an over-caffeinated rabbit as she sat Indian-style upon her mount, an aura of neon light reflecting off of her tie-dye colored leather body armor, and on her face was an open smile that easily outshone the twin suns of Tatooine.

"Heya, Sunshower!" Pinkie Pie shouted as the Party Rancor slowed to a stop right in front of Sayori, greeting her apprentice by her pony name.

"Ahoy there, PinkieEEEEEE!" Sayori shouted back, screeching in surprise when Pinkie suddenly Force Pulled her off of the dune and straight up to the Rancor's head, whereupon she took her into a crushing hug that forced a squeak out of the peach-haired girl.

"IT'S SO GOOD TO SEE YOU!" Pinkie Pie joyously screamed in her ear.

"…same…here…ma'am…"

"Oh, no need to be so formal!" said Pinkie as she let go of a thoroughly winded Sayori. "I'm a FUN Lord of the Sith, after all."

"Then shouldn't it…be *Farth* Terror'Anment?" asked Sayori, who was bent over double trying to regain her breath.

"Nah. I prefer to be laughed *with* , not *at* . Introducing myself as 'Farth' anything would just be *begging* everyone to ridicule me. A Sith Lord should command respect, even when she isn't interested in galactic domination," replied Pinkie.

"Fair enough," Sayori conceded, standing back up. Then she raised an eyebrow. "You look different."

"Yeah. This is what they call 'Anthro-Pony' form in the Hub," said Pinkie, pointing out the pony-like ears on her head and the bushy tail sticking out from the seat of her pants. Her skin was pastel pink, of course.

"I see…so, uh, what are we going to do first?"

"Annie covered the basics, right?" Pinkie inquired. Sayori nodded. "Awesomesauce! I knew I could count on him to handle the boring stuff for me. So then, our first step is going to be getting you your own lightsaber! I know cutting weapons are more your friend Yuri's thing, but no self-respecting Sith is lacking a lightsaber. And once we've done that–"

Pinkie was interrupted a Ping. She and Sayori Pinged back immediately, as did several others. Pinkie frowned and did some quick counting on her fingers. "Waaaaaaaaaait a minute…that was one too many, unless someone from Luke's circle just Woke Up *super* early."

Something in Sayori's pocket beeped; she pulled out her communicator and clicked it on, "Yeah?"

" *Let our friend know that Master Windu just Woke Up,* " said Anakin, who sounded terribly amused.

Pinkie gasped, "Mace is Looping now?! DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS?!"

Sayori had only spent one loop with Pinkie before this, but it didn't take very long to figure out what Pinkie was all about. "We have to throw him a party?" she hedged.

"YOU'RE DARN SPANKING RIGHT WE DO! Back to the Disco Shuttle, Ranky!" she exclaimed. The Party Rancor whipped about-face. "Wait, I blew it up, didn't I? Okay, new plan! Ranky, Sayori, standby for WARPSPACE TRANSITION!"

Master, apprentice, and Rancor all disappeared in the instant opening and closing of a localized Warp Rift, accompanied by the sound effect of a pineapple upside-down cake blowing a raspberry into a tin can at 150 decibels, with the unintended side effect of transfiguring the surrounding desert landscape into a sea of lemon pudding.

7.8 – A Practical Application of Force (by EastwindOfAzarath)

" *I really didn't want to have to enter her room like this... Isn't it kind of a breach of privacy? But she really leaves me no choice,* " thought the boy, as per usual. He slowly opened the door to find...

Sayori sitting on her bed, legs crossed and meditating. The lights were off with the exception of a few candles on a table on the other side of the room. He sighed a breath of relief.

"You are interrupting my mediation. Although I do thank you for checking up on me. I supposed you were worried. Afraid I had done something drastic." Sayori smiled as she stood up. "Well, I think I

have done enough meditation for today... I should get ready for school. Today is a big day!"

Monika was shocked when she saw Sayori walk through the door to the classroom. She was able to not show surprise on her facial features though. Sayori however, could *feel* the shock. She grinned at her classmate.

"You sure are surprised, right Monika?" Sayori said with such a sugary sweet voice that Monika could almost feel herself getting a cavity and stomach ache. "Bet you thought I'd offed myself, huh? You are gonna need to try harder than that to get rid of me Ms. President"

Natsuki and Yuri, whom had both been carry various things across the room, spilled everything they were carrying and stared. Monika's pen flew out of her hand and her jaw dropped. Her only thoughts were the two one word questions: "What?" and "How?". And the two questions applied to many different things at once.

"Instead of hanging myself, I managed to dispel the dark clouds in my head with a nice long meditation period. I knew you were listening yesterday during our conversations after school, so I made sure to leave out the fact that I had been managing to combat my depression so that I could see your reaction. It was well worth it."

She then pulled a lightsaber from... somewhere and turned it on, letting its bright red glow permeate the room. "It'll take more effort to take down Darth Somnus, Monika. You will do well to remember that. Besides, you have already been forgiven. It's not entirely your fault. You haven't done anything else yet and I was waiting for this event, so I'm not mad at you. Just don't try anything else. Or you will not like what happens."

The lightsaber then disappeared and she went over to grab one of Natsuki's cupcakes. As she bit into the pastry, she heard sudden movement and then three Pings all at once.

"I hate late Awakenings." came Monika's voice. it was very soft and reserved.

"Holy crap Sayori! That was so badass!" exclaimed Natsuki as rushed toward Sayori to give her friend a big hug.

"That truly was a grand display. Though I am curious: when did you become a Sith? And do you think I can hold your lightsaber? For just a moment?" came Yuri's voice. she twirled a strand of hair around her fingers.

"I am curious as well actually! I didn't figure you to be a Dark-side Force user Sayori!" Natsuki added.

"Last loop actually. I had a fused loop with Star Wars and Equestria. Specifically Pinkie Pie is my teacher. You know how I told you she was gonna help me with my depression? Well, I didn't tell you how. Now did I?" she said with a small smirk.

Yuri furrowed her eyebrows and spoke, "Wait? Pinkie Pie is a Sith? Weird."

It was Monika's turn to speak up, "Actually, I did hear about her being a Sith. From what I understand, the Force isn't Good nor Evil. I don't know the specifics, just that the movies mostly focus on evil Dark-side users and never really shows any that aren't evil. That's why most have that misconception. I definitely don't see Pinkie Pie as a Jedi, they are all about patience and reasoning and logic. Things I don't think the pink pony excels at. Especially logic."

Sayori's smile grew even bigger, "Yup, exactly! She made me her official Apprentice and we had so much fun that loop! let me tell you all about it..."

7.9 – Unshakable

"MACY-WACY!" screamed the concentrated eldritch embodiment of all that is unholy and high in sugar and fats. You can just call her

Pinkie Pie. At present, she was in her "anthro-pony" form, as that was the form of the Equestrian species in this loop. So, you know, humanoid frame, pony ears, a long, curly, bushy tail to match her bushy 'mane' of curly dark-pink hair, pastel-pink skin…

Also, she was riding a rancor decked out in barding so heavily sequined it was like a disco ball. And a human in her late teens or early-twenties, still dressed in her white desert robes, was clinging for dear life to Pinkie's back.

Jedi Master Mace "Galactic Basic, motherfucker, do you speak it?!" Windu was walking down a hallway in the Jedi Temple, just thinking about stuff, when suddenly he heard a bizarre sound in twelve different dimensions, followed by a Warp Rift opening in front of him (not that he knew that that was what it was) and a rancor barreling out. Mace wouldn't call himself an expert on rancors, specifically, but through the Force he got the very strong impression that this particular rancor…wanted a hug?

A moment later, a thoroughly bemused Master Windu was being *cuddled* by a rancor. *'Master Yoda warned me these loops would get crazy. Prepare me for this, his warning did not,'* thought Mace.

Pinkie Pie giggled, "Oh, Macy…if you think rancor-snuggles are way out there, then you haven't seen ANYTHING yet!"

"Is it common for Loopers to read minds?" asked Mace while subtly trying to extricate himself from the arms of Ranky, who was just as obtusely resisting his resistance.

"Kinda! How'd ya know I was a Looper? Did somebody tell you all about the big, bad, party pony?" asked Pinkie with a sly grin. She hopped down from her mount, bringing a somewhat rattled-looking Sayori with her. Ranky dropped Mace, and disappeared in another burst of Warp energy.

"No," replied Mace as he dusted off his robes, "But you seem to be familiar with me, even though I don't know you at all. I'm guessing

you've met me before, in previous Loops."

"Uh…yeah," said Pinkie, deflating somewhat. Something was off…

"Ahem…Pinkie?" Sayori spoke up. "What…um…what are we doing? I mean, I'm sure a party is going to be involved somehow but…uh… what do you want me to do, I guess?" she asked, pushing her fingers together in her typical *moe* fashion.

Pinkie was too busy staring at Mace to respond. Mace, in turn, looked impassively back at her. Sayori had the sudden, vivid impression that a tumbleweed blowing past them would not be too far out of place for the sudden mood shift of the room.

"SOMETHING RANDOM!" Pinkie abruptly screamed, Unpocketing a banana-cream pie and flinging it at Mace's face.

Being a Jedi, Mace caught it, naturally. And he didn't so much as flinch. So as not to be rude he did, however, withdrew a fork from inside his robes and took a bite out of the pie. "Hmm…too much sugar, not enough banana. Aside from that, not a bad piece of confectionary work. Thank you, Miss." Without another word, Mace turned around and continued down the hall, still eating the pie.

Pinkie stared blankly into the distance, one of her eyes twitching.

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Sayori grimly.

7.10 – It's a Fine Night Tonight, Wouldn't You Agree?

Yuri Awoke in one of the more unpleasant situations that a Looper could Awaken in, and one she had experienced once before. Namely, surrounded by *the undead* .

One thing Yuri was noted for by her friends was the way her mind worked. Quick and sharp, like a blade forged from lightning. In the span of a few seconds, she took in her surroundings–

' *A decent-sized mob of zombies, or something similar to them, but only a dozen or so close enough to be an immediate threat; also, two humans wearing the same uniform I am, probably law enforcement, armed with handguns also like mine; most likely my comrades. We're in a small town, near a church; it's nighttime, presence of telephone poles and automobiles and styles of clothing indicate late 20 th or early 21 st century Earth or similar.'*

–skimmed through her Loop Memories–

' *I'm an English policewoman, British-Japanese descent, named Yuri Victoria. My comrades are named Simon and Eddie. This is an English village named…Cheddar? Huh. Oh, nasty past I've got, spent most of my childhood in an orphanage, very violent as a child…oh dear, how unpleasant. I was orphaned by home invaders, suffered a gunshot injury and had to watch one of the robbers… yeah, no wonder I was a violent child.'*

–and even as her mind was whirling, she was also *acting* : she crouched and knocked both Simon and Eddie to the ground with a circular leg sweep so they were out of her way, Pocketed her gun and Unpocketed a pair of razor-sharp sickles, and quickly went to work. Within seconds, every ghoul within arm's reach of her and her partners was either headless or had otherwise been sufficiently dismembered to no longer pose an immediate threat. The policemen tried to get up, but Yuri quickly barked in her Unawake self's Cockney accent, "Stay down, both of ya! Leave it to me!"

Suffice it to say, Yuri went about her work with goddamned gusto.

…

It didn't strike Alucard as being odd that every ghoul he had come across on his way through Cheddar had been little more than a pile of limbs. It was a little unusual that they all appeared to have been cleanly slashed to bits as opposed to being blown up, bullet-riddled, or torn apart, as were the typical mook-disposal methods of one Seras "Police Girl" Victoria. But hey, if she wanted to play

Swordmaster this loop, who was he to judge? What did strike him as odd, however, was that she didn't seem to have finished off the vampire priest and left the village yet. He assumed she was one of the two that had responded to his Ping, but…

Anyways, he decided to head to the church and see what the hold-up was. He was only mildly surprised to find a young woman with long, lavender hair fighting the priest with a katana. She was obviously a Looper; she was too strong and too quick to be a normal human girl, and her bladework was too graceful for anyone with less than centuries of training. Quick as she was, however, the vampire she was fighting was quicker. And even when she landed a lucky hit it didn't seem to do much good; the vampire quickly regenerated any injuries he sustained, so Alucard felt it was safe to assume she was fighting with a normal steel sword.

"Die, damn you!" Yuri hissed as she attempted to decapitate the priest, only for her blade to pass harmlessly through his neck as though he were made of mist.

She heard someone call out, "Catch!" and saw something flash out of the corner of her eye. A man in a long red coat had thrown a sword her way.

She easily caught the blade in her hand, flipped it around to grab the hilt, and then flipped it over for a reverse-grip while using her katana to slap the priest's hand aside as he tried to grab at her. She stepped to the priest's side and dropped into a sweep kick, fully rotating and holding out the new sword so that the priest fell on it. The unusually shiny blade skewered through his chest, emerging with a coat of blood and causing more of it to erupt from his mouth. Yuri's eyes narrowed, and she smiled widely. She stood up and swung her leg into the priest's shoulders, kicking him up and off of her blade, returning her katana to her Pocket so she could use a two-handed grip. The priest glared fearfully, not at her, but at the weapon in her hands. Growling savagely, he threw himself at her with his hands outstretched and his fangs bared.

Yuri smoothly slid to the side at the last possible second, brought the silver sword down through his neck as he passed by, and gave a small sigh of satisfaction as the decapitated corpse hit the floor and slid to a stop just in front of the stranger in red. Yuri turned her gaze on him and watched him warily while she Unpocketed a large handkerchief and used it to wipe the sword clean. She raised an eyebrow at him and gave another Ping. Two Pings replied, and the man in red nodded at her, his smile widening.

"You're quite the artist with a blade, young lady," the stranger complimented.

"Thank you," Yuri replied simply, "I take it you came here to deal with the zombie problem?"

"Strictly speaking, I very rarely have to bother myself with the ghouls, or the vampire, anymore. Our Loop's Anchor can usually handle things on her own," the man explained.

"But you had to save her ass the first time, didn't you?" Yuri questioned, tossing the cleaned silver sword back to him. He didn't bother catching it physically; he just Pocketed it as soon as it was close enough.

"Indeed. Well, seeing as you are the visitor and I the host, I will offer you the courtesy of introducing myself first. I am called Alucard, elite field agent of Her Majesty's paranormal defense force, the Hellsing Organization."

"Alucard…" Yuri's eyes widened as she suddenly remembered a manga she had read from Natsuki's collection eons ago, and realized why the man before her seemed familiar. "Ah! Hellsing. Yes, I once read a manga based on this universe. So, you're a vampire as well, then. A very powerful one, at that."

Alucard tilted his head. "And that doesn't appear to bother you in the slightest. Fascinating…I certainly hope you're not one of those

unbearably vapid 'vampire fangirls' I've found scattered all over the Multiverse."

Yuri wrinkled her nose and shook her head vigorously. "No, certainly not. I respect vampires for what they are; a perfect manifestation of what Man fears might be lurking in the night, but at the same time a metaphor for Man's own fear of death, weakness, and old age. To be granted power, immortality, and everlasting youth, at the price of gluttonously stripping life from others; from the weak and fearful, especially. Vampirism is a means of achieving freedom, but not of a shallow, beautiful sort. It's a dark freedom, a twisted freedom. A forsaking of morality and virtue to gain in one's life the kind of permanence that those same morals and virtues are meant to secure in the next life. A vampire also embodies doubt and scorn, for anyone who would give up so much of themselves and take so much from others only to gain a pale and incomplete shadow of the eternal reward promised for a virtuous life? They must surely doubt that such a reward truly exists, or have some reason to scorn the entity offering that reward."

Alucard slid his shades down his nose to show the eyebrow he had raised. "Did all of that just come off the top of your head?"

Yuri nodded.

"Interesting. I have just one more question for you, young lady." Alucard removed sunglasses and gave her his most monstrous smile. "How do you feel about moonlit walks?"

After a long pause…Yuri just smiled back.

7.11 – The Child of Night, part 2 (7.1 cont.)

-The Child of Night, Part 2-

[*Sayori…why am I in your head?]

Sayori blinked. She was at Blooky Acres, kneeling on the ground and filling a large communal bowl with snail food. "Um…who was that?"

[*Eh?]

[*What do you mean?]

[*It's me, Monika!]

"Monika? Why are you in my head?!" Sayori demanded, looking around furtively. "And when did you pick up telepathy, anyways?"

[*I haven't.]

[*I'm not just talking to you in your mind, I'm literally *in* your mind!]

[*And I don't know *why* , that's why I asked you!]

[I just Woke Up and I'm still sorting out my Loop Memories…we're under a mountain?]

"Uh, yeah. We're in the Underground, where all the monsters live. But they're–"

Just then, "DEFEND YOURSELF, HUMAN!" screamed a fiery, female voice.

Sayori flinched and whirled around, using her Hyper Yoyo to deflect an energy spear.

[*OH MY GOD, WHAT IS THAT THING?!]

Sayori cartwheeled to the side to evade Undyne's wild charge!

And immediately slipped on a spot of snail slime.

Then, quite involuntarily, she rolled backwards and jumped back up to her feet. A pair of guns appeared in her hands, and again without any input on her part she started firing on the armored fishwoman

running towards her. Sayori recognized the guns, and quickly put everything together. "Stop it, Monika, she's a friend! Time out, Undyne, TIME OUT!"

Undyne skidded to a halt, and Sayori's arms dropped.

[*Oh…I see.]

[*Heh-heh-heh…sorry about that, Sayori.]

"What the…when did you get guns, Sayori?" asked Undyne, "And who's Monika?"

"A friend from home. My Anchor, in fact."

"Oh. This has to do with that Loop stuff Papyrus and Alphys were telling me about, then?" asked the presently Unawake Captain of the Royal Guard.

"Mmhmm. Excuse me, ma'am, but I need to go ask Toriel some questions," said Sayori, politely bowing before leaving.

…

"You say your friend, Monika, has Awakened as a voice in your head?" asked Toriel. She was in Grillby's, sitting next to Sans. They had been discussing a stand-up routine they wanted to do on Mettaton's show before the end of the loop.

"Yeah, sort of. Hey, can I get my usual, Grillby? Thanks," said Sayori as she took a seat on Toriel's other side. "She's not really a 'voice'. She just, kind of…puts words there. If that makes sense. Kind of like, somehow, in my Loop, during Variants where I'm the President, I can see the game's text boxes. It's like that; text boxes in my head. Any explanations, there?"

Toriel folded her arms on the counter and stared deeply into the middle-distance. "It's…a fairly common Variant. The kind that *could*

be part of our Baseline, but it seems that Yggdrasil can't make up its mind. You remember when I told you…about the other children?"

"Yeah. The seven that came before me," Sayori replied with a nod.

"…the six before you, and before Frisk…they're highly variable. Not stable enough to be considered more than abstract details of our Loop's past. But the first, the first human child to fall into the Underground. They are still highly variable, but decidedly more important to our…story, for want of a better word. Like Frisk, their sex is Loop Variable. Their name was Chara. They became very dear to us, to Asgore and Asriel and I."

Sayori nodded solemnly. She had been in the Underground for two weeks, and this was only the second time Toriel had mentioned her son by name.

"Chara become a part of our family. Asgore and I adopted them as our own, and Asriel–who was the one to find them after they fell–happily accepted his foster sibling. In fact, Asriel and Chara soon became the very best of friends. Chara won over the hearts of our people, and helped ease our fear of the humans. Hence why we left the Ruins and set up New Home right by the barrier."

[*Oh…oh gods, I remember…Asriel, and the buttercups…oh no…]

"Uh, Monika? You okay?" Sayori asked out loud. She got no response.

"Let me guess; she remembered the buttercups?" asked Toriel, glancing aside at Sayori with a sad expression.

"Yeah, and now she's all quiet. What about buttercups?" asked Sayori, starting to feel worried.

"It was how Chara–or, in this loop, your friend Monika…committed suicide. By buttercup poisoning."

Sayori felt her heart sink. *'No…'*

"that's enough." Sans suddenly hopped down from his stool. "c'mon sayori. i can tell ya the rest. grillby, get tori some hot chocolate and put it on my tab will ya?"

"It's okay, Sans. I can tell the story," said Toriel firmly.

"….ya don't have to…"

"But I will," said Toriel resolutely. "…I'd like the hot chocolate, though. Ahem, as I was saying…Chara didn't kill themselves on a whim. It was part of a plan they had hatched with Asriel. As I told you before, only a human with a powerful soul can freely pass through the barrier…or someone carrying both a human and monster soul. But to destroy the barrier, and free all of us from the Underground, would require one being using the power of seven strong human souls. The plan was for Asriel to join Chara's soul with his own, cross the barrier and travel to the human village Chara had came from under the pretense of carrying Chara's remains to a bed of golden flowers they had loved in life. There, Asriel would…acquire…six more human souls, and destroy the barrier. But the plan went awry. Asriel couldn't bring himself to follow through with taking any human souls, and the humans of the villages reacted as you would expect to a little monster carrying a dead human child. It took the last of his strength for Asriel to return home, and then…"

Toriel couldn't go on. Sayori got off of her stool and wrapped her arms tightly around the motherly monster.

"asgore declared war on humanity," said Sans. "announced his intention to take the soul of any other humans who fell into the underground, until he had enough to destroy the barrier. he had six, by the time frisk got here."

"I left New Home and returned to the Ruins," said Toriel, "I brought Chara's body with me, and buried them…"

[*Under the bed of golden flowers, where you fell at the start of the loop, right?] Monika finished. Sayori repeated this, and Toriel nodded.

"Okay, but why…?"

"This appears to be one of the common Variant Loops where Chara functions as a…sort of 'narrator' in Frisk's head. Or yours, this loop. Except Monika replaced Chara…"

"I fell on her grave and she hitched a ride in my head," Sayori summarized. "Sure, why not. Is Chara a Looper?"

Toriel and Sans both shook their heads. "As I said, they're highly Loop Variable. I don't know if they're stable enough to Loop. And whether they can or not, I'm…not entirely sure it would be a good idea if they did."

"What do you mean?" Sayori asked.

[*…it might have something to do with Chara hating humanity… assuming that that's why I have memories of hating humanity.]

"in certain loops, chara wants to destroy everything. and i mean *everything* . all of existence itself," Sans explained. "whether that's the cause or effect of a 'genocide variant' is also loop variable. they might be a tragic victim, or they might be a potential mle. that part of our baseline is too damaged for any of us to be certain. frisk seems optimistic that they can be redeemed, if they even need to be, but… that's frisk for ya. kiddo's, like, hope personified.

"I see…um, 'genocide variant'?"

"oh. yeah. see, when they're awake frisk is as pacifist as they come. but unawake frisk…they can be anything from a pacifist to an unrepentant mass murderer that slaughters their way from one end of the underground to the other. literally."

"So whenever Frisk isn't Awake and is in a particularly murderous mood, we call it a "Genocide Variant", you see," explained Toriel.

"Wow…your Loop is as messed up as mine," said Sayori, equal parts awestruck and horrified.

[*Hey, Sayori?]

[*I…um…I'm gonna lay low for the rest of this loop, I think.]

[*I've got a lot of stuff I need to think about.]

[*And…could you please not mention this to Yuri or Natsuki?]

[*I will, just not until I'm ready.]

[*Please?]

' *Yeah, of course I will, Monika.'*

Then, suddenly, the doors to Grillby's blew open! Triumphant, heart-pounding music started pulsing through the air! A tall figure, wrapped up in a steel-plated parka, stood in the doorway, her cape billowing in the harsh, arctic wind!

(By which I mean Papyrus was standing behind her, shaking her cape up and down and making 'whooshing' noises with his mouth, because the wind was totally dead today.)

"HUMAN!" Undyne bellowed, summoning a spear in each hand. "DID YOU THINK I WOULDN'T REALIZE YOU HAD SKIVVED OUT ON OUR SPARRING?!"

' *For once, I think I could actually use a violent distraction,'* thought Sayori, who grinned as she hopped off of her stool. She Unpocketed a yo-yo in each hand and took a ready pose.

"Oi! Take it outside, you two," Grillby crackled at them in dismay.

Compiler's Commentary:

7.1: My goodness Sans, you can be such a *bonehead* sometimes… and I will see myself out now…

7.2: Soos is a nice guy. Anyone would be lucky to have him.

7.3: Personal headcanon; Natsuki didn't realize bats could be freaking adorable until she met Flutterbat.

7.4: Breaking games can be an educational experience. They can also turn into bloody nightmares.

7.5: Yoda doesn't strike me as the Dating Sim type, but hey. Crazy things, will you do; when all eternity, you have.

7.6: I am simultaneously proud and ashamed of myself for coming up with that title.

7.7: No jokes, my girlfriend actually finds rancors to be, and I am quoting her here, "adorable". She first told me this a good four months ago. *I am still processing this fact* . (I think I might be dating a very, very short female Hagrid…)

7.8: All hail Darth Somnus, Smiling Lord of the Sith.

7.9: Snip title is a reference to an M. Night Shamalyan film, *Unbreakable* , which featured Samuel L. Jackson as one of the main characters. One of Shammy's good ones, I recommend it to anyone who likes having their head played with.

7.10: I'm straight, but Crispin Freeman's silky voice could talk me into joining the undead with pretty much no problem.

7.11: Nice to see that Sans and Sayori are getting along.

Chapter 8

8.1 - In Which Monika Gets Hax (5.4, 6.9 cont.)

Agent Smith wandered through the abandoned streets of a dead city in a broken simulation of reality. Abandoned vehicles, various street fixtures, chunks of concrete, and other random inanimate objects floated and drifted at varying heights. Lights flickered off and on. 'Déjà vu' loops played out everywhere, as well as other visual and auditory glitches in the Matrix. The sky itself appeared to have a few pixelated tears in it; aside from that, it was a light gray overcast.

Smith had been wandering for days without seeing anyone, human or program. But he was certain, somehow, that there was at least one other person left in the Matrix, and he intended to find her.

In the months since their last confrontation in the subway, Neo's Replacement had managed to whip up a massive cult-following throughout the Matrix, which she had used to liberate humans from the simulation *en masse* . An impressive feat to be sure, and all the more so if this was, as Smith suspected, her first go-around in their Branch. She had, in less than a year, managed to liberate nearly one-tenth of the Matrix's population before the Agents had been tasked with waging all-out war on her followers.

Half of the remaining population was wiped out in the following two months. A handful of what remained had been liberated by the Human Resistance's last mission before the Matrix was crashed by the Machines to prevent the humans from adding anymore to their ranks. Smith wasn't sure where he was, now, seeing as the Matrix as he knew it was no more. He was sure that the rest of his Branch's native Loopers had wiped out the Machines by now, but he could *feel* that Monika was somewhere in this simulation.

Then, quite suddenly, he turned a corner and there she was. Sitting on a bench, slumped forward with her head bent low. She looked like

a thoroughly broken-down shell of a human being, which definitely piqued his interest. He had suspected that she had preserved him for gloating purposes, but now he second-guessed himself.

"Miss Anderson," Smith intoned as he approached the miserable-looking Looper, his guard up and ready for anything.

Anything, except for being tossed a gun, which Monika did without looking up. He caught it without thinking, of course, and stared down at it. Then he looked back to her. She had raised her head, but not to him. Rather, she was staring millions of miles deeply into the middle distance.

"I don't get it," said Smith, feeling the beginnings of frustration well up in him.

"I'm running a pseudo-Matrix simulation from a supercomputer in my Pocket. And before you ask me how I got you out of the real Matrix before it crashed and put you in here…the short answer is: Technomancy," Monika explained, her voice hollow.

"Alright, fine. But why did you just give me a loaded firearm?"

"So you can kill me, obviously," replied Monika.

Smith was silent for a moment. Monika showed no signs of elaborating. Shrugging, Smith pointed the gun at Monika's head. A long moment of silence passed. Finally, Smith growled and lowered the weapon. "Why? I don't get it. You've won…so *why* ?!"

Monika actually laughed at that. "You're much more human than anyone seems to realize, Mr. Smith."

Smith almost shot her right there and then, strictly on principle, but restrained himself as he was too invested in getting some damn answers for this woman's erratic behavior.

Monika continued speaking, "You're wrong. I didn't win…I failed miserably. Billions of lives lost, because I didn't think my plans through. Didn't ask the others for more input. I thought I could outsmart the Machines. Oh, I knew a lot of people were going to die. A large-scale mobilization of Agents against my movement was inevitable, as was the Machines eventually deciding to purge what was left of their crop to prevent the humans from gaining even more strength. My failure was in *grossly* overestimating my ability to manipulate the conflict; also, I wasn't able to implement the centerpiece of my endgame before the Machines decided to crash the system."

"And what, might I ask, was your endgame?" asked Smith.

"Subverting control of the Matrix itself from the Machines," Monika stated plainly.

"How?"

Monika sighed, "Well…turns out, my first mistake was…well, to flub a well-worn line, not killing you when I had the chance. See…you remember when I told you about being from another universe? Well, Time is broken, in all universes. This one, mine, all of them; time is stuck in repeating 'Loops', if you will. To stabilize these Loops, each one has at least one person who remembers each Loop, and these people are called Loopers; I'm one such Looper. There's one universe, which we call the Hub, where every other universe exists as some work of fiction; these are, if we were to compare the Multiverse to a computer-system, data backups of those universes. In the Hub, this universe exists as a movie franchise. Mostly as a trilogy of movies, plus an animated anthology and a couple of video games. But getting back on topic, I've seen the movies before I came into this Loop. So I already knew everything that was *supposed* to happen before I started changing things. In this universe's "baseline", I was–or rather, the man whose place I'm taking–supposed to destroy you in a certain way. This would cause you to become something akin to a virus within the Matrix. You would then go on to make duplications of yourself out of everyone in the

Matrix: bluepills, redpills, and even other Agents and other programs. This would escalate to the point that The One would be able to make a deal with the Machines, entering the Matrix to fight you one more time, knowing in advance that it would end with him being assimilated by you. This would give the Deus Ex Machina construct direct access to you, and allow it to destroy you once and for all."

Monika took a deep breath, and summarized, "If I had destroyed you, as per Baseline, I could have used this opportunity to subvert the Matrix for my own use. I had already written the program to facilitate the process and everything. But when you and I met…I just didn't have it in me to destroy you, Smith. You remind me too much of myself."

Smith felt another pang of disgust at the comparison, but ignored it. Monika continued, "So my stray sense of mercy cost me my one, best chance to liberate the entire human race with minimal casualties. Out of arrogant optimism, I went ahead with my plan in hopes that another opportunity would present itself. Morpheus and the others humored me, I suspect, so that I could learn the consequences of keeping plans like these too close to my chest. So that was my big plan for this loop shot to hell. Which just leaves one thing left. According to Morpheus, the loop is due to end in a week or so. And for everything you've gone through, I think you deserve at least one iteration of reality where you score a clean, unambiguous victory over The One. So go ahead, Mr. Smith. Pull the trigger."

Smith just stared at her a little longer. "You humans really are insufferably deranged," he finally said, "You fight on and on with inexhaustible determination against hopeless odds. Then you turn around and give in to despair over a decisive victory, just because you lost more human lives than you bargained for. Why are you so invested in the lives of other humans you have never and will never meet, anyways? Beyond the handful of humans you share some disgusting emotional bond with, the rest of your species is just competition for territory and resources. Trying to invest yourself in

the survival and… *happiness* …of the entire human race is completely detrimental and absurd –"

"Shut the fuck up, Smith," Monika snapped, giving him a hateful glare. "Seeing to the happiness of others is worthwhile *because* life is shitty and horrible almost all of the time. Most people are born into a constant struggle to survive, and for some that struggle is next to impossible if not impossible outright. We grow up wanting everything, when even in an ideal world where everything is split up and shared equitably that would leave everything with next to nothing. So for anyone to get enough to be happy, it means other people *have* to suffer. Say that four girls are in love with the same boy, for example? For one of them to be happy, the other three have to be miserable. And no matter what we do, no matter how much we succeed at in our lives, we're all of us doomed to die one day, anyways. So yes, Life is the ultimate unbalanced equation. Making everyone happy is utterly impossible."

"Then why do you try?" asked Smith. *'If she says "Because I choose to" or "Because I can", I'm just going to shoot her without a second thought,'* the irritable Agent decided.

"Because settling for what's easy is…well, easy," Monika replied, leaning back on the bench. "Striving for the impossible may be pointless, sure, but what's the point in doing something you already know you can do? It's unsatisfying. Humans are flawed creatures, but the upside of their flaws is their irrational determination to succeed. They're creative and inventive–I mean, you can't really consider them stupid, can you? Seeing as they created your creators, and all. Short-sighted? Yes, sometimes, very much so. But not stupid. A human can do *anything* they put their minds to. Even killing gods. So why *not* aim for the impossible? It's the only goal worthy of their capabilities…but on the flipside of that, there's me, and my reason is a lot more humble."

' *She's definitely going to say "Because I choose to", isn't she?'* Smith thought with resignation. He raised the gun again.

But then Monika surprised him. "I know it's impossible to save everyone, from death or from unhappiness. But I try, anyways, because…because I *have* to, Smith. I have to try, because I have no right to exist otherwise. I never should have come back from death. But I did, so all I can do now is spend Infinity trying to make up for my unforgivable sins."

Smith was rapidly growing to hate this human's ability to hook his curiosity. "What sins?" he asked, lowering the gun again.

Monika slowly stood up from the bench. She stretched her arms, and looked up at the gray, torn, glitch sky. "I brainwashed, mindraped, and otherwise destroyed and betrayed my only friends trying to earn the love of a being from beyond my own world. A being I knew I could never truly be with, because they lived in the real world while I was just a construct in a game. But I didn't care. I sent my best friend into a spiraling depression and encouraged her, both with words and by reprogramming her, to commit suicide. When that messed up the game, I just deleted her and started the game over. I threw her away like so much rubbish. My other two friends, I gradually reprogrammed into nightmarish caricatures of themselves in hopes that the Player would be revolted by them enough to love me. One of them went insane and stabbed herself to death. I deleted her, and the other one. She was the only one who was still alive when she was deleted, so I can only imagine how horrifying her final moments must have been. To top it all off, whatever our game *should* have been like, I'm sure I thoroughly *ruined* it for our Player. It was supposed to be a light, fluffy dating simulator. A game of romance for people too shy or unconfident to pursue romance in the real world… or just people who really like romantic stories, I suppose. And I mutated it into a total nightmare."

She spoke no more after this. She pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes before blowing her nose.

Smith, naturally, was quite unmoved by her story. "So your sense of heroism is fueled by guilt," he summed up.

"Yep. I'm a repentant monster, the Atoning Anchor," replied Monika.

"Strange that someone like you would be chosen to stabilize an entire universe," remarked Smith. He really wasn't sure what to do with this conversation from here.

"It's…not a very big universe, all things considered," Monika admitted, "And besides, literally no one else could do it. Again, I'm basically a god in my loop, so if I'm not Awake I could really mess with whoever else the Anchor might have been."

"Hmm," was all that Smith could think to say.

Awkward silence reigned, for a moment. Then, Smith raised the gun and took aim at Monika's head once more. She turned and faced him, but made nothing in the way of a defensive posture. She just looked at him with open (still somewhat moist) eyes, devoid of fear, hatred, anger, or even casual disdain. Definitely not a look he was used to seeing.

Another moment passed in silence…

' *I don't want to shoot her,'* Smith realized, more than a little surprised. While he didn't shoot every single human he crossed paths with, the feeling of actually *not wanting* to shoot someone was something new to him. He didn't have any good reason not to, but he suddenly found that he just…didn't feel like it.

Smith decided he didn't like this feeling. He tried, actually *tried* to pull the trigger. But his finger wasn't cooperating. And he knew that nothing was stopping him. He was holding himself back, refraining for no-damn-good reason as far as he could tell.

Monika frowned. "So…what are you waiting for?"

"I…don't want to kill you…" Smith said slowly, carefully, almost dissecting the syllables as he did so, as if hoping saying it out loud would make it make sense.

It didn't.

But Smith suddenly remembered what Monika had told him when he had boggled at her reluctance to destroy him.

"You don't?" Monika asked, cocking her head.

"No…bizarre concept, isn't it?" replied Smith. He lowered the gun. After a moment, he dropped the gun, seeing no point in holding something he had no intention of using. The two stared at each other.

"Why?" Monika asked.

"The blazes if I know," Smith replied, anger and confusion plainly evident in his voice. "I just…somehow feel as if I'd be shooting myself…" he muttered, his irritation rising steadily as he pondered the nonsense of his own thought process.

Quite suddenly, Monika was smiling and squealing and *oh gods she was hugging him!*

Shots rang out as Smith fired three rounds rapid into empty air. He whirled around. Monika was standing behind him (or had been, rather) and looked sheepish. "Sorry about that…it was a long gamble, but it seems to have paid off!"

"What are you gibbering about now?" Smith demanded.

"Empathy!" Monika declared, thrusting one finger into the air. "The cornerstone of sentience and society! The means by which cooperative union is possible between self-interested beings! The emotional distinction between a lowly beast and a higher entity! By means of empathy alone can we feel kinship with 'Not-Us', can we conceive of any kind of 'Us' that includes more beings than just… well, us…"

"What is your point?" Smith asked, removing his shades and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"…with 'Us' being defined as those with whom we empathize, and 'Them' as those we don't—I'm sorry, what?" asked Monika, who had been carrying on in some kind of rant about empathy. "Oh, right… congratulations, Mr. Smith! You passed my little test, so you get THIS!" she abruptly screamed before thrusting her hand out at him. In her hand was a small card. Tentatively, Smith took the card.

He read it aloud, "'Doki Doki Looping Literature Club - Honorary Member: Smith'…what?"

"You don't want to kill me because you empathize with me," said Monika, almost…no, no, *definitely* smugly. "Or, at the very least, you have the *capacity* for empathy. Thus, by the authority vested in me–*by* me–as President of the Literature Club, I've approved you for probationary membership! Pending the approval of my club members, of course. In the meantime, you can at least consider yourself an honorary member."

"… *what* ?" Smith repeated.

Monika chuckled and rolled her eyes, "I'm offering you an olive branch, silly. If you ever Loop into my Branch, you can expect hospitality and an opportunity to make friends with my fellow club members."

Smith stared at her. After a moment, he realized his mouth was agape, and closed it. "You… *how* ?! How did you know I was Looping?!" Smith demanded.

"Aside from the fact that you just told me?" Monika asked slyly. Smith paled. Monika snickered, "I'm kidding~ But seriously, I could tell because you kept calling me 'Ms. Anderson'."

"So?"

"My name in this universe, before I Woke Up? It wasn't Monika Anderson. *It was Monika Salvato* ," Monika revealed with the shit-eating-est of shit-eating grins. "But I accidentally freed myself from the Matrix before we could meet in the Matrix, the way you first met Neo. So I'm guessing you just assumed I would share his last name, as I'm guessing is the case for most people who Replace him, correct?"

Smith could only facepalm in the wake of this revelation.

"And that Desert Eagle in your hand isn't the gun I gave you," added Monika, pointing at the firearm he had dropped. "So I'm guessing you already know all about the Pocket? Keep that card with you. If you ever meet any of the girls on the back, show them the card and they'll do what they can to help you out…provided you're not up to anything nasty. Well, Yuri might be down, depending on what *kind* of nasty it is…she's the tall one, by the way."

Smith checked the back of the card, which included pictures of four girls with their names underneath: Monika, Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki.

"Now then, let's pass the rest of the loop in a somewhat homier setting, eh?" Monika snapped her fingers. Their surroundings glitched for a moment before resolving into The Clubroom. Monika and Smith were seated at a table, with a steaming teapot and two cups. Monika was smiling at him with her hands folded under her chin. "So, what's your game, Mr. Smith? Chess? Checkers? Chinese checkers? Backgammon? Connect Four? Do you have a preference of teas? I'm partial to jasmine, myself, but I like chamomile and ginseng too…"

Smith silently resigned himself to an insufferably asinine week. But he Pocketed the membership card. Just in case.

8.2 – Pie-lated Realization (by Wookywok)

"WOW I just got something."

Monika quirked an eyebrow at Natsuki. "What?"

"Well, you know that one loop where, instead of deleting everyone, you just threw a bunch of pies at them?"

" … Yeah? I'm not following."

"You know the engine our game runs on, right?"

"Of course I know that. It's called… oh, that's bad. That's really bad. That's terrible."

Natsuki gave a solemn nod. "Yep. We ran on Pie-thon."

8.3 – The Pet Boy of the Literature Club (by RileaSW)

Monika stared as an Unawake Sayori dragged in a large Akita inu, it was only when she saw its lack of a face that she knew why.

"Um, Sayori, I know we need another member, but I don't think pets count," she said in objection.

Sayori put on a little pout. "But Monika, just look at him, isn't Hiroaka just the cutest little sweetie?"

Monika sighed. "He is cute, I'll give you that, but there's the issue of the school forbidding pets on campus."

The pink-haired vice president of the literature club gave her best impression of a puppy dog pout, pressed her face next to Hiroaka's and turned her voice to baby-talk octaves. "How can you say no to this face?"

Monika fought with all her self-control not to deny her depressive friend outright.

8.4 - Invitation

"So yeah; you can see why I get just a bit triggered when people deride Shakespeare as 'old-fashioned' and 'dry'," Monika concluded, "I mean, sure, I guess 'old-fashioned' is objectively true, in a certain sense. But if you actually bother to learn the English of his day–which is *not* that hard, seriously–his plays are *anything* but dry."

"Thank you!" said Blake Belladonna, throwing her hands into the air, "It's *so* nice to meet someone who already gets it without me having to assign them homework."

"He had a really dirty sense of humor and I love it," added Sayori.

"He also codified a good deal of today's storytelling tropes, to say nothing of his contributions to the English language itself," put in Yuri.

"Also, he was a *total* burn master," said Natsuki, " *'Thine face is not worth sunburning.'* "

"Thou art a boil, a plague sore," quoted Yuri in a lofty tone.

"Thou cream-faced loon," countered Natsuki, turning to face Yuri.

"Thou lump of deformity," Yuri riposted, facing her as well.

"Thy tongue outvenoms all the worms of the Nile," Natsuki retorted, eyes narrowed.

"Would thou wert clean enough to spit upon," said Yuri with a smile.

"The rankest compound of villainous smell that ever offended nostril," said Natsuki through clenched teeth.

"More of your conversation would infect my brain," said Yuri, turning away.

"Your brain is as dry as the remainder biscuit after voyage!" Natsuki declared in her hammiest voice.

Yuri calmly took a sip of her tea, before turning back to Natsuki and uttering, "Away, you three-inch fool."

" *Daaaaaaamn,* " said Monika, Sayori, and Blake as Natsuki collapsed to the floor.

"Oh, oh, and he invented "Your Mom"!" added Sayori excitedly.

"He did?" asked Natsuki, popping back up.

"' *Villain, I have done thy mother'* ; Titus Andronicus, Act Four, Scene Two," said Sayori proudly.

"Wow, can't believe I missed that one," muttered Natsuki.

" *I* can't believe I've never met you girls until now…how long have you been Looping?" asked Blake.

"Long enough to discuss the literature of Hub-Earth, twice over," said Monika, "So not very long, by Looper standards. We have met a few of your Loopers, though. I met Pyrrha and Penny in a Galaxy Rangers Loop…as their artificial 'daughter'. It was only a little awkward, at first."

"Emerald visited us once and kicked Monika's ass at Super Smash Bros," added Natsuki with a grin.

"And there was that one time that elevator crashed through our clubroom, and that pretty lady with the gold eyes told us about your Anchor. I mean, I'm assuming she was one of yours, anyways," said Sayori.

"That would be Cinder Fall, yes," Blake confirmed.

"Cinder, Cinder…Pinkie mentioned that name to me once," said Sayori, furrowing her brow.

"Well, they're both Sith, so there's that," Blake explained.

"Oh, your Branch has a Sith, too? Neat! Hope I meet her again someday," said Sayori with a grin.

"Wait… *you're* a Sith?" Blake asked.

"Darth Somnus! Pinkie Pie's own apprentice!" said Sayori proudly.

"Wow. I'd heard rumors she had taken an apprentice…and now that I've met you, it makes perfect sense."

"Thanks!"

"Cinder Fall…I've heard that name, too, somewhere," said Natsuki thoughtfully. Then her eyes widened, "Wait, she's the one that tried… you know, 'The Big No-No', right?"

"Natsuki the Tactful, everyone," Yuri muttered sardonically into her cup of tea.

"Hey! That *was* tactful…for me, anyways…"

"Yes. Cinder's the one that attempted Ascension. It should be noted, however, that she was insane with cognitive dissonance and Mythos Hacker interference at the time. She's much, much better now," Blake explained calmly.

"So she's the Monika of your world," Natsuki surmised.

Right on time for Monika to spit her coffee across the room.

" *Natsuki!* " Sayori and Yuri exclaimed scandalously.

"Hey, this is her penance for You-Know-What. An infinity of eternities of Natsuki Burns."

"And I'll be the first to admit that I deserve every barb," Monika said with a sigh.

"I honestly can't tell if you like her or hate her," said Blake to Natsuki.

"And now you comprehend the quintessence of Natsuki," Yuri said with a nod.

"I see. So Natsuki's the Weiss of your world," Blake observed as she sipped her tea.

Natsuki frowned. "I have no clue who Weiss is, but I suddenly feel insulted."

"She's our Tsundere. But more 'Dry Snark' than 'Savage Burn', if you take my meaning. Also a Jedi, psychiatrist, sometimes business tycoon, and our Second Looper."

Monika suddenly laughed. Blake looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I just noticed an interesting juxtaposition, is all… Sayori's our Second, and she's kind of a contrast to your Weiss. Seeing as she's a Sith and a Genki Girl, financially irresponsible, and a…ah…hmm." Monika sipped her coffee and quite suddenly became fascinated with one of the walls.

"And I have depression," Sayori bluntly finished for her.

The ensuing awkward silence was awkward.

"You should talk to Weiss, if you ever Loop into Remnant," said Blake at length, "She has a *lot* of experience helping us–all of us–with all kinds of issues. Like my bout of self-loathing or that whole deal my fiancée had with a psychic pink rat mind-screwing her all the time. And she helped Pyrrha deal with her Baseline death, and Ruby gets depressed from time to time, and Cinder was just a monumental mess of mental problems for a hot minute. And she's Gray, so she probably won't give you too much flak for being a darksider," Blake added with a smirk.

"Thanks," said Sayori, smiling, "Between my friends and my Sith training it only rears its ugly head once every dozen or so loops, but talking to a trained professional won't hurt. My last session with Twilight was about a million years or so ago."

"Spontaneous subject change!" Natsuki shouted, "Which Bronte Sister would you pick to write your life story?"

…

"Uh…where did the sun go?" asked Blake, who had just now noticed that it was dark outside. Probably because the clubroom was still illuminated as if by daylight.

"Oh, sorry about that," said Monika, "Our Branch's code is pretty wonky, so sometimes I have to do some things…manually." The Anchor closed her eyes, and the room went pitch-black for a second before the electric lights flickered on. "There. That's a lot less headache-y."

"Hooooooow did you do that?" asked Blake.

"Local-tier reality warper," said Monika, "Baseline-inherent, non-Ascension-risk. After getting some practice in a few Matrix Loops, I can make our game indistinguishable from the 'real' world."

Natsuki hung her head and made loud snoring noises.

Blake blinked. "Game? What game?"

"Our game. Doki Doki Literature Club," said Monika. She smiled mysteriously at Blake and clasped her hands under her chin. "You didn't notice at all, did you?"

Blake's eyes widened. "We're in a *video game* ?"

"A dating simulator, to be specific," said Yuri with an amused smile, "You're Replacing our game's 'player character'. He's not Looping and doesn't have a Baseline name, naturally, seeing as he's a cipher for the Player, but we call him Hiroaka."

"I'm…in a Dating Sim?" Blake asked for clarification.

"That's right~" Sayori sang.

All four girls leaned forward and said in one monotonous voice, " *So who's your waifu, Blake-senpai?* "

Blake leaned way back and blurted, "Yang Xiao Long!"

The Doki-Dokis all laughed. "We're just messin' with ya, Blake," said Natsuki. "It's not everyloop we get a visiting Looper as fun as you."

"Or with such a comprehensive grasp of literature from across the Multiverse," added Yuri.

"And you're a ninja!" exclaimed Sayori giddily.

Monika suddenly stood up, her expression stone-cold serious. "Girls, we need to have a discussion. Now. In my Pocket." All four of the local Loopers abruptly disappeared, leaving Blake alone.

"What?" Blake flatly asked the empty room.

A few minutes later, the girls reappeared, and they were all grinning ear-to-ear. Monika took a step forward and said, "Blake Belladonna, we have found in you a kindred spirit. We would be honored if you accepted this, a humble gift of friendship from us to you." She bowed at the waist and held out a card.

Blake accepted the card, and her eyes widened as she read it.

" *Doki-Doki" Looping Literature Club Honorary Membership Card*

Blake Belladonna

Ninja of Love

Literary Preference: Yes

Waifu: Yang Xiao-Long

"I…wow. Thank you, you guys. I'm touched," said Blake, "I mean, I know we pretty much just met but…I can tell how close you girls are.

This doesn't seem like a casual gesture."

"Oh, no, not at all," Natsuki confirmed, "This is the only time we've ever done this, like, as a group. Monika's given someone a card before, but we're still not sure if he wants anything to do with the club."

"Well anyone who would turn their nose up at being included by such tight-knit friends is just silly," said Blake firmly. She glanced back down at the card and nodded, "Again, thank you. I would be honored to be part of *the* Looping Literature Club."

"Holy crap, we're recognized by a pre-Crasher," said Sayori, sounding a little faint. Then she went from 2 to 11 in a snap, "Girls, we're freaking LEGIT now! Oh, oh, ohohohoh, Natsuki! Natsuki, do the thing, do the thing!"

"Calm your tits, Sayori!" said Natsuki, trying not to laugh at her friend jumping up and down and clapping her hands. She held out her hand, and a small box appeared upon her palm. "Here ya go, Blake. The Club's traditional 'Welcome Aboard' present."

Raising an eyebrow, Blake accepted the little box and opened it. Sitting inside was one of Natsuki's signature cupcakes. Naturally, it was decorated to look like a cat. Blake's other eyebrow joined the first. She looked up, "Did you *know* that I'm a catgirl in my world?"

"No kidding?" asked Natsuki, "Some Variants make me a catgirl too. Why do you–oh. *Oh* . Uh…no, it's not like that Blake, I always make my 'Welcome to the Club' cupcakes like that. Since Baseline."

"Oh," said Blake, actually sounding a little disappointed, "Well, that's a little less cute. Oh well," she shrugged and bit into the cupcake. Her eyes widened again. "Oh, wow, this is *good* ! You definitely need to share a batch of these with Ruby. But make them sweeter. Not that this isn't sweet enough for me, but Ruby is a super sugar fiend. Satisfy her sweet-tooth, and my Anchor will love you forever."

"Noted," said Natsuki, beaming proudly at Blake's approval.

"So about that game you were telling us about," said Sayori as they all sat back down, "Remnantball, right? Think you could teach us how to play? You could ref while we play doubles? We've been sitting here shooting the breeze *all day long* . Don't know about the rest of ya but I could use some exercise!"

"Sure," said Blake, "But first…you guys mentioned something about having a hardline to your Admin?"

"He's aware of everything written by any of his Loopers, yes," said Monika, "Though in the spirit of tact and respecting privacy, he doesn't pay any attention unless one of us writes his name."

"I see," said Blake, taking a sip of her tea. "Well then, could you do me a favor? Tell him to let Marianne Columbia, Admin of Remnant, know that the four of you have been invited to the wedding of Blake Belladonna and Yang Xiao Long," she said with a smile.

This statement was meant by deafening silence and astonished expressions on the faces of the four Literature Club Loopers. Monika, face flushed, let out a laugh and said, "Whoa…Blake, that's very…thank you, of course we would be honored to attend! But you know, you needn't feel any kind of oblig–"

Monika was interrupted by a piercing, tinnitus-inducing, rapturous shriek of such pure unadulterated **joy** that the Game itself reacted to it. Everything was, for a second, literally rose-tinted as Sayori launched herself across the table and glomped Blake, tackling her to the ground.

"THANK YOU, BLAKE!" Sayori wailed, crying literal tears of joy. No, not just normal tears prompted by joy. Monika didn't know how it was possible, though she suspected Pinkie Pie had something to do with it, but if her senses weren't wrong then the substance streaming from her friend's eyes was actual liquid happiness.

"Oh my gods *we're invited to a WEDDING* I'M SO HAPPY MY HEART MIGHT EXPLODE **can you believe this, guys?!** " Sayori further exclaimed. Monika, Yuri, Natsuki, and Blake all felt overwhelming waves of happiness crashing over them, leaving them all feeling dizzy and also crying the normal, figurative kind of tears of joy. Chairs and desks, Yuri's tea set and Monika's coffee machine, and everything else in the room not bolted down started levitating as the Force started rippling out from Sayori.

After a moment, Sayori calmed down enough for her to realize what she was doing, and she quickly got a grip. She gently lowered everything and everyone to the floor in the proper, upright orientation. A moment after, she released Blake from her death-grip hug and backed away, blushing furiously. "I am *so* sor–" she began.

"No, no," said Blake, holding up a hand and standing back up on shaky legs. "That was…very unexpected and very disorienting, but an interesting and not *entirely* unpleasant experience."

"Still, sorry. I've never…ah…that was a new one for me, too," said Sayori, her blush only deepening.

"Well, if something as simple as a wedding invitation caused a reaction that strong in you, I can't say I regret doing it," said Blake.

Another awkward silence followed as Sayori continued to look flustered, staring at her shoes, while her friends tried to regain their bearings.

Blake coughed into her fist. "So…uh, still up for a game of Remnantball?"

8.5 – Get Your Game Face On (by Masterweaver)

"...erm."

"Sayori? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, it's... it's nothing," Sayori said dismissively. "It's just... there's something on your face, is all."

Hiroaka blinked, quickly scrubbing at his face with one hand. "Oh geeze-"

"There you go, it's gone!" Sayori smiled broadly. "Come on, let's... head to school now! I want to introduce you to the literature club!"

She turned around, mentally adjusting herself. A functional Hiroaka. It had to happen at some point, she knew, but it was still kind of a surprise. How would the girls react...?

8.6 – FACE THE MUSIC!

" *CAN'T YOU JUST MUTE THE BACKGROUND MUSIC?!* " Natsuki 'screamed' in Doki-Doki Sign Language. She was wearing a huge pair of fluffy, "Gouge-My-Eyes-Out" pink, noise-cancelling earmuffs to protect herself from those gods-awful blaring trumpets. They weren't helping.

" *I ALREADY HAVE!* " Monika signed back just as emphatically. She was wearing a much more practical-looking pair of yellow shooting-range-style ear-protectors.

"THERE'S NO ESCAPE!" Yuri screamed verbally as well as signing frantically, as she stormed back into the clubroom. "YOU CAN HEAR IT EVERYWHERE!"

" *And we can hear it in our Pockets, too,* " Monika signed with a miserable expression. " *So it must be an Yggdrasil thing. Which means my powers are useless against it.* "

"What kind of horrible glitch is this?!" Natsuki roared to the heavens, demanding an answer from an indifferent Multiverse.

"THAT'S IT! I'M CUTTING MY EARDRUMS OUT!" Yuri decided, Unpocketing a scalpel.

Monika and Natsuki, of course, both tackled her to the ground and wrestled the scalpel out of her hands. " *ABSOLUTELY NOT!* " they both yelled at her.

"WE'RE ALL SUFFERING TOGETHER, DAMN IT!" Natsuki added.

Everyone, it would seem, except for Sayori, who was sitting at her desk humming and bobbing her head to the music, which she was writing down on a sheet of paper for future reference. If her friends' current state was any indication, this would make for *excellent* leverage in the future, the young Sith Looper figured.

8.7 – Bat-Crafts (by Masterweaver)

Natsuki proudly lifted her invention up for all to see. "Behold, the Bathammer!"

"That... that's just a sledgehammer drilled into the handle of a bat," Yuri pointed out.

"I was kind of expecting something more camp," Sayori admitted. "I mean Batmobile, Bat Cave, Bat Shark Repellant..."

Natsuki pouted. "Well excuse me for not being a master weaponsmith."

"It's quite a serviceable weapon," Monika assured her. "Keep it around for zombie apocalypses, okay?"

8.8 – Squid-ika…Wait, Shouldn't That Be "Mon-squid"?

Yuri looked up when the door to the clubroom opened with a loud *BANG* . There, standing in the doorway, was Monika. Yuri had noted that an odd quirk of this loop was that Monika always wore a very long skirt; one that went all the way down to the floor and then some. She had only Awakened this morning, and hadn't yet had a chance to ask her about it. Natsuki, who was also Awake, didn't know either. Nor did Sayori, who wasn't Awake.

But anyways, back to Monika. She looked *pissed* . Of course, it wasn't always easy to tell with Monika, unless you had Yuri's powers of observation. Monika's expression was neutral (though the fact that she wasn't smiling even a little bit was a red flag all by itself), but she had her hair up in a bun instead of her ponytail, and there was no sign of her iconic white ribbon. That was her "ready for violence" hair-do; the leather gloves on her hands were another sign that she was in a mood to throw down. Her lips were pursed so tightly that her actual lips were only barely visible. She had a to-go-cup of coffee in her hand, but Yuri could tell by scent that there was no cream or sugar in it. *And no cinnamon, either* . That right there was the most worrying sign, to Yuri.

Monika scanned the room very briefly, stopping as soon as her eyes fell upon Natsuki, whom she immediately started towards. There was something odd about the way her legs were moving, but Yuri couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Are you *Awake* , Natsuki?" Monika asked in a voice stiffer and colder than a literal North Pole as she loomed over the shortest member of the club.

"Y-yeah? What's up, Your Anchorship?" Natsuki asked, trying not to sound nervous.

' *She has no clue what Monika's mad about,'* Yuri reckoned, observing Natsuki's body language. *'But she can tell as well as I can that Monika's in a foul mood about* something *.'*

Yuri's eyes widened as Monika suddenly grabbed Natsuki by the collar of her blazer and hoisted her up out of her seat with her free hand. Monika held Natsuki inches from her face, and Yuri had to strain her hearing to make out the words the club president hissed. "I don't want to hear a *damned* word out of you about *any* of my past misdeeds for the rest of this Loop, or for the next few loops after this. As far as I'm concerned, this loop makes us even for a while. *Because this is all your fault* ."

Natsuki made several stammering noises, which Yuri suspected were meant to form something in the vein of "I have no clue what you're talking about!"

Raising her voice to address the rest of the room, Monika put Natsuki down and asked, "Does anyone have *any* memories from this loop of seeing my legs?"

Yuri shook her head, Natsuki shook her head *emphatically* , and Sayori just looked confused. Hiroaka was probably also confused, but it was harder to tell with him.

"Well, this is why," said Monika as she lifted her skirt up high enough to reveal her–

' *Oh my gods!'* thought Yuri as her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. Natsuki suddenly looked pale as a sheet as she jumped back away from Monika. Sayori grabbed Hiroaka and ran out of the room screaming her head off. Something about, "I've seen enough hentai to know what happens next!"

"Now, if anyone needs me, I'll be at the school's pool soaking my… limbs…" Monika sighed as she…moved…out of the room.

Yuri and Natsuki were left alone in the clubroom. They were both deathly silent, processing what they had just seen.

"Hold on," Yuri muttered.

"Wait a second," said Natsuki at the same time.

They both looked at each other. " *Sayori watches hentai?!* "

When Sayori Awakened the next day, everyone agreed that it was a very disquieting loop.

8.9 – Statue of Small Stature (by Harry Leferts)

Sighing, Monika walked into the classroom for the club only to blink in confusion. It was not that all three of her friends were Awake that was the cause of her confusion. But rather, the fact that Yuri and Sayori were both crouched down staring at a small figurine on the desk. "Uh, guys? What's going on...?"

Moments later, she had a disbelieving expression as the figurine sighed. "What else? Yggdrasil having some fun."

Quickly making her way over, Monika crouched down and boggled a bit. "Natsuki? Is that... you?" At the nod, she frowned. "Wait, what sort of joke is this?"

Not getting an answer from Natsuki, she turned to Sayori who coughed. "Apparently Natsuki is a... tsukumogami this loop."

Eyebrow raising, Monika frowned some. "A tsukumogami? You mean as in the object that after a hundred years gains a soul? That tsukumogami?" At the nods, she frowned even more. "Oh-kay? So what sort of joke..." Looking at Natsuki, the Anchor pinched her nose. "Oh no... don't tell me..."

Tone dry, Natsuki just sat there. "This loop, I'm the tsukumogami of a netsuke figurine."

8.10 – Dem Sugar Fiends

"Ah…been a hot minute since I've been to this Loop," Kyoko said to herself as she soared through the sky over a vast, rolling grassland. She hadn't crossed paths with Bulma or any of the local Loopers yet, but she hadn't been Awake very long either. So she figured she'd just bolt on over to Mt. Paotzu, see what Goku and them were up to, maybe get a spar in and hang around for lunch.

Then she heard a sonic boom and saw something streak through the sky towards the earth. *'That might mess up someone's day when it impacts,'* thought Kyoko, deciding to cruise after the falling object.

Before she could get close enough to see what it was, she heard a distant voice yelling, "Minemineminemineminemine…."

' *Abridged variant?'* Kyoko wondered, *'Doesn't sound like Veggie though, sounds like a…girl?'*

"MineminemineCANDYBEAM!" shouted the as-yet unseen girl. A lance of pink light struck the object, which became a dark-brown orb that almost immediately started steaming and bubbling from the heat of reentry. Kyoko stopped following the huge ball of chocolate in favor of looking to see where/who the Candy Beam had originated from.

"That didn't quite sound like Buu, either," Kyoko muttered. Then she saw something small and bright pink, flying lower over the grounds, right towards where it looked like the chocolate was going to land. Kyoko snickered, "Of course, why didn't I think of that?"

A moment later, Kyoko landed next to a bubbling pool of liquid chocolate. Standing (or, rather, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet) was a short Majin. Hot-pink skin, pink-and-black eyes, an obviously female (if small-chested) body, and interestingly enough she had not one antenna but what appeared to be two bunny ears atop her head. She wore the same attire as Kid Buu, with the addition of an open vest over her chest. She also had a very large hammer in her hands.

"Uh…hey," said Kyoko, "I'm Kyoko Sakura, who're y –"

"STOP!" screamed the Majin girl, as the bubbling intensified right in the middle of the chocolate pool, just before a man-shaped figure burst up out of it, screaming in pain. "HAMMERTIME!" roared the Majin girl as she leaped forward and hit the figure with a two-handed swing that blasted it right out of its chocolate coating and sent it flying hard enough to plow a furrow when it hit the ground. "Heyhey, check it out, I planted a Raditz!" shouted the Majin girl with a chortle.

"Nice. Are you a Looper?" asked Kyoko.

"Hmm?" asked the Majin girl, appearing to notice her for the first time. "Oh, hey. What's up? Name's Natsuki. I'm from the Literature Club."

"What Literature Club?"

"THE Literature Club. The Looping Literature Club," said Natsuki. A moment passed. "…the *Doki Doki* Literature Club?"

Kyoko shrugged.

"Well, anyways; yeah, I'm a Looper. Who're you?" asked Majin Natsuki.

"I'm Kyo–" Kyoko started to repeat herself, only to be interrupted by Raditz erupting from the ground in an explosion of rage and ki. He showed little sign of injury, besides the still-steaming blots of chocolate stuck to his skin. He had a bestial fury about him, looking as though he'd transform into an Ozaru out of sheer anger if it were possible to do so.

Natsuki made an exaggerated pouty face, the kind that was physically impossible without a Majin's elastic physiology, and screamed at him, "NO CHOCOLATE FOR YOU!"

It wasn't quite 'breach through dimensions' loud, but the scream was more than enough to make Raditz double-over and hold his ears. While he did so, Natsuki zipped over and pummeled him with her hammer. Her hammer, which had suddenly *quintupled* in size, quite literally 'Whack-A-Mole'-ing him into the ground. Natsuki shouldered the massive hammer with one hand, leaned forward, and peered down into the hole. She frowned, held up one hand, and yelled, "BUNNY BOMB-AAAAH!" as she slammed a…curiously bunny-head-shaped pink Ki blast into the hole. After another inspection, Natsuki gave a satisfied nod before bouncing on over to where Kyoko stood. Her hammer was replaced with an equally large fan, which she used to start cooling the pool of hot chocolate.

"So…you like beating up bad guys, I take it?" Kyoko asked.

"Heck yeah! Best part of the Loops, besides not being deleted anymore," Natsuki chirped. One of her 'ears' bent forward and elongated, stretching all the way out to the middle of the pool and dipping in. It then retracted and dropped a little blob of hot chocolate on Natsuki's waiting tongue.

"Deleted?" asked Kyoko.

"Oh yeah, my Loop *sucks ass* . I mean, there *is* a Happy Ending, but it doesn't always happen in Baseline. And even then, getting deleted is a thing that happens sometimes, depending on how late Monika Wakes Up. She's my Anchor. You want some?" Natsuki asked, stretching her arm out to scoop up a fistful of chocolate from the middle of the pool and offering it to Kyoko.

"Uh…sure, why not?" Kyoko shrugged, accepting the chocolate –still very warm and amorphous but no longer searing hot–and stuffing her mouth with it. "Sho, Reprashing Buu I shee," Kyoko remarked thickly.

Natsuki grabbed her own face and stretched it out; it snapped back when she let go, but now she had a trunk-like appendage above her mouth. Said appendage dove into the chocolate and started sucking up the sweet, dark substance while Natsuki carried on her end of the conversation (having apparently segregated her esophagus and trachea, or Majin equivalents). "Yeah, Woke Up as Kid Buu mid-rampage abooooooooout five million or so years ago? Which is *almost* as long as I've been Looping!"

"Wow…so, Bibidi never sealed you, then?"

"Nope! I dusted his wrinkly green ass," said Natsuki with a proud grin. "I've been practicing my new abilities and binging on sweets ever since!"

"Damn, sounds like good times," said Kyoko, nodding in approval.

"Yeah…kind of miss my friends, though," Natsuki admitted. Then she frowned, and sighed, "Okay, fine, I *really* miss my friends…but on the upside I've collected a crapton of sweet souvenirs to share with the club next loop! To say nothing of all the alien sweets I've learned to make…although, I don't know how many of them will be safe for *human* consumption…" Natsuki trailed away thoughtfully. "And another silver-lining!" she abruptly exclaimed, grinning broadly. "Unless Yuri's had an even longer loop, next time I see her I'll be the older one!"

"Yuri, huh? That your bestie?" asked Kyoko, summoning her spear and using it to fish out another blob of chocolate from the swiftly shrinking pool.

"More'r'less," Natsuki affirmed, "She's too damned tall and super-duper creepy, and she can be all kinds of pretentious and tryhard, but she's a good friend." Natsuki finally seemed to have had her fill of chocolate; she withdrew her trunk, which shrank back into her face. "Let me know when you've had your fill. I'll Pocket the rest. Waste not, and all that. Sorry, I still haven't caught your name."

"Kyoko Sakura," said Kyoko once more, "From Mitakihara."

"Hmmm…sounds familiar. Not like I've been there, but like I've heard about it," said Natsuki. She pulled a picnic blanket out of her Pocket, tossed it out on the ground, and flopped down on her belly. Her 'bunny ears' shrank and widened into the shape of kitty-cat ears. Her mouth curled into a 'cat smile' as well.

"…taking a catnap, there?" asked Kyoko.

"Sun's warm, blanket's cozy. Feel free to join me," mumbled Natsuki.

"You just *ingested* at least two or three times your body weight in chocolate," Kyoko pointed out, "And now ya wanna take a nap?"

"Compressed into a super-dense ball in my stomach-type-thing for later use," Natsuki explained. "Ya done with the chocolate?" she

asked, looking up at Kyoko with one eye open. Kyoko nodded, nibbling at one last piece of chocolate on the end of her spear. Natsuki stretched out an arm and Pocketed the still-sizable chunk of chocolate left embedded in the earth.

"So, what are you gonna do for the rest of the loop. More of the same?" asked Kyoko as she plopped down on the blanket.

"Pretty much, until Beerus wakes up from his nap. Then I aim to kick it with him until the loop ends. I mean, a cat that's a literal god of blowing stuff up? Yes please! Hopefully my first-class pudding will convince him to train me some."

"Pudding, you say?" Kyoko was intrigued. Before she could say another word, Natsuki was back up on her knees and holding a bowl of pudding out to her with a huge, earnest grin.

"Go on, try some! I'm a confectionary *champion* ."

Kyoko shrugged before sampling the pudding. Her eyes widened. "Oh, *wow* . That is pretty good, no kidding…"

Natsuki's eyes narrowed. "But?"

"But…I don't know if it'll meet Beerus's standards. He's pretty hard to please, y'know," said Kyoko seriously.

Natsuki bowed her head. "I know…I'm still a small fry in the loops, and there's still a lot I have to learn…"

"True enough," Kyoko agreed. "But hey, I happen to have a pudding recipe that Beerus goes nuts for, and nothing pressing in my schedule," the redhead declared. "You seem like my kind of people. Wanna hang?"

"Oh, hell yes!" exclaimed Natsuki, who didn't *stand* back up so much as she *flowed* up into a standing position, hands on her hips. But

before we hit the kitchen, how's about a spar? You look tough and I haven't had a challenge in centuries."

"Sure, why not; I'm game," said Kyoko, stabbing her spear into the ground and cracking her knuckles. "Any rules? Flying or ground-only? Ki or no ki? Armed or bare-knuckles?"

"All of the above and anything goes!" declared the pint-sized Majin, summoning a warhammer in each hand.

"Kid," said Kyoko with a grin, "We're gonna get along *famously* ."

8.11 – DokiRonpa Loops Chapter 1 (by Powergoat)

(Doki Doki Literature Club!)/(Danganronpa)

Naegi Awoke, just as he woke up, in the normal course of things, sitting face down at a desk. His body feels sluggish, as usual, and took a moment to settle. Then, Naegi sent out his Ping.

Five Pings in return. Five? Must be some kind of fused loop, or visiting loopers. Even if three new classmates Awoke at the same time, they wouldn't know how to ping yet.

Reaching into his poc-

Damn. Null loop. That makes things a little trickier.

Next, diving into loop memories… and there are a few differences here. The world is the same, but in his before-school research he found some different names.

The Ultimate Writing Prodigy, this loop is now 'Yuri Fuwaka'. Still a famous writer, however it seems instead of Romance Novels she is now famous for writing Horror. Her work has apparently led to an overwhelming number of people developing a fear of swimming.

The Ultimate Fanfic Creator is now 'Natsuki Yamada'... and a girl. She sold even more than Hifumi did at his school festival… though

she still focused on 'Princess Piggles'.

And perhaps most notably, the Ultimate Fashionista is now 'Monika Enoshima'. Still very photogenic in her shoots, but now with brown hair and distinctive green eyes, Must Different then before. Just a variant or are they the visiting loopers? Are they awake?

Either way, he must be careful. With a purposeful heart, he made his way to the Main Hall.

Sayori was annoyed.

There were a number of things to be annoyed with moments after she Awoke in the Main hall.

First, Null loops always made things harder, especially since they always seem to happen when you would need out-of-loop resources the most. Being cut off from her Force powers especially made it harder to manage her mood.

Second, she was Monika's sister. That alone would not be a point of annoyance, but her loop memories show that she apparently has an extremely toxic dependant relationship with this version of her Club President. She was obsessed to the point of treating attacks on her life as a sign of love. Considering how messed up this unawake Monika is, she might even have been right.

Third, she was currently *disguised* as Monika, and expected to act like her. Hair dye, hair extensions, and even green colored contacts for her eyes, and she had to keep up this act until she could confirm that Monika was Awake. Considering that for the most part Monika Enoshima acted like Baseline Monika, that wouldn't be fun.

Fourth. Killing school game. School game of Killing. She was expected to help her classmates of this loop kill each other. Since apparently destroying MOST of the world wasn't enough, and

televising a killing game would send the world into even deeper despair.

At least this 'Ultimate Talent' was useful. She may be a looper with a plethora of combat experience, and a Sith besides, but guns and explosives were never really her forte, and the varied skill helps.

Just as she is going to check Natsuki or Yuri, she is approached by Kyoko Kirigiri. In her loop memories, she is apparently the 'Ultimate Detective', but Monika was worried such a talent would 'spoil the game' too fast, so even that was taken from her as usual.

But that seems to not have mattered here since Kirigiri asked the question that would make such measures moot.

"Monika Enoshima, correct? Sorry to bother you, but you looked like you may be feeling a bit loopy?" Kirigiri asked.

"Hey there!" she said with mock offense, "I'll have you know I am Awake as I can be."

'Monika Enoshima' gave her best club president smile. Maybe if Monika was awake, this would be a rather relaxing loop after all.

Meanwhile….

Monika was miserable.

This was a rather depressing loop all told. Not the worst, but her Unawake self's Despair obsession was a bit above par. A Chaotic Evil of the worst sort, the same as her 'Mother'. That she could even think right now was strange, even with her thoughts seeming a bit sluggish. She couldn't really do anything about it at the moment though, just responding to the Pings she received and hoping for the best. Stupid Null Loops. Of course, of all the complaints in her mind, one reigned supreme.

'Why did I have to be stuck in a USB!'

Compiler's Commentary:

8.1: Look at that, Mony's makin' pals.

8.2: The only thing worse than a bad pun is not catching it until the much later.

8.3: Sadly, Natsuki was having another catgirl loop, with all the anti-canine instincts that entails.

8.4: Sayori is only a *slightly* bigger wedding geek than I am. X3

8.5: Let it be known that I will never (sincerely) apologize for making a bad pun.

8.6: Let it be known that I actually love the horn-heavy BGM for Gen 3 Pokemon. That being said, it's a lot easier to love music when you can mute it at will.

8.7: Holy cuddlesome cudgeler, Batman!

8.8: Sayori watches it for the plot! No judging. :T

8.9: Yggy-sama upping its pun game, while mine remains consistent trash.

8.10: And thus, Natsuki met the big sister she had always wanted.

8.11: All my years of dissecting teddy bears have prepared me for this moment...wait, what?

Chapter 9

9.1 – Serious Discussion? (by Masterweaver)

"So have you gotten to fifth base?"

Natsuki choked on her punch. Or, at least, she tried to, but some things were actually remarkably difficult for Monika to code in. What ended up happening involved the purplish liquid bursting from her eyes and ears and disintegrating into component pixels, while for a brief moment her nose was upside down.

"Blrmfigl!?" she managed, which was understandable given that her mouth was animated two seconds behind the rest of her face and her tongue floated three inches to the left of her cheek.

"Oh, uh..." Sayori leaned back. "Monika? I think I discovered another bug!"

"Damn it, what is it-oh, yeah, that's a bug." Monika sighed. "Natsuki, what were you trying to do?"

"Mrmf jmph flrmcg mrm *Frzarle* -" Natsuki gave Sayori a pointed look, despite not having eyeballs. "-mszx nr hr mrldh hrmphi qzmnin!"

"Ahuh. Right..." Monika looked at nothing for a bit. "...Yes, okay, huh. I don't... know how this happened. But next time, do the spit-take, I've at least gotten that down."

"Nrmzifah," Natsuki grumped.

"I'm going to do a quick reset on you, just to the last minute. Okay?"

"Rnnnnnnz..."

Monika shut her eyes. Natsuki was replaced by a green box, which was replaced by a generic grey silhouette, which became a much more coherent and very clearly frustrated Natsuki.

"Are you alright?" Sayori asked. "That looked painful..."

"It felt like a hiccup in my *skull* ," Natsuki grumbled. "How long till you have that fixed?"

"It's a complex interaction of various sub-programs," Monika pointed out. "Remember how long it took me to figure out how to program in eating?"

"Yeah, yeah..." Natsuki waved her off. "Thanks, Prez. You go back and do... whatever it is you were doing."

Monika rolled her eyes and rejoined Yuri, who was gently tying a ribbon around Hiroaka's sleeve.

"Now." Natsuki turned back to Sayori. "What was it you just said?"

"Oh! You and Yuri. I was just wondering... how far your relationship has progressed."

Natsuki stared uncomprehendingly.

"...You are dating, right?"

"What? No." Natsuki snorted. "That's not really... come on, Sayori. You know what our baseline's like. Some people can date, but after all that nonsense I don't think that any of us would try for that sort of thing."

"Oh."

Natsuki frowned. "What's the oh?"

"What?"

"Why did you say Oh like that?"

"Like what?" Sayori asked innocently.

"Like you did that whole drawn out mouth thing and your head leaned back when you said it, like something was just revealed to you. Like I said something you thought was interesting. Or strange. Or both."

"Can't I just say 'oh' without there being any ulterior motive?"

Natsuki gave her a suspicious look. She smiled beatifically.

"...I'm not dating Yuri."

"Of course not," Sayori said. "My mistake. Really."

"She's... not my type, anyway."

"Oh, yes, your type." Sayori nodded in understanding.

"Yeah. My type. You know, the... swish, bang, welcome to awesomeville type."

"Somebody to sweep you off your feet."

"Hell no, I'm not weak! I mean somebody that can keep up with me." Natsuki smirked. "I am raw awesome in a tiny package, sister."

"Ah, so a fellow fighter," Sayori mused.

"Yep."

"Who could give you a good spar."

"That's right."

"She'd have to be good with weapons of course."

"...Or he," Natsuki pointed out.

"Right, right. Or otherwise."

"Yeah. And!" Natsuki added. "And she-or he, or they-would have to be comfortable in a domestic setting, right? Because I do baking. So, war and peace."

"Ah, yes, the type that can do it all."

"Y-hey, hold on, I'm not... like... greedy, or an idiot. I know nobody's perfect. I just... want somebody that can keep up with me, right?"

"Of course." Sayori smiled, glancing over to Yuri. "You know, she stitched that shirt herself."

"The one Hiroaka's wearing?"

"Mmmhmm."

Natsuki took in the outfit.

"...It's a pretty good shirt," she admitted. "But we're not dating," she added firmly.

"I have no idea how I could have gotten it so wrong," Sayori mused.

9.2 – Emu-tional Breakdown

"Why is the school full of ostriches?!" exclaimed a bewildered Yuri as soon as she found one of her friends among the teeming, feathery horde. Said friend was Sayori, who was inexplicably riding a mechanical stallion and wearing a cowgirl get-up. Naturally, this was because she was currently engaged in *lassoing* the flightless birds.

"They're emus, actually," said Sayori, tugging at one particularly cantankerous bird.

"Alright. Fine. They're emus. *But why emus, Sayori?!* " Yuri reiterated emphatically.

"I don't know, Yuri! Why pies? Why trumpets? Why *anything* ? WHY LOOPS?! Because Yggdrasil's broken and totally spazzing out. That's why. Now quit rhetoricalizing and help me wrangle!"

"Hey!" shouted Natsuki from the other end of the hall, where she was trying to corral the herd of emus with a staff. "I heard that, Sayori! If I can't swear, you can't make up words!"

Sayori's response was to Unpocket a mason jar labeled "Natsuki's Swear Jar", withdraw a quarter from it, and chuck it at her friend. "Fair enough!" Natsuki shouted back, having plucked the flying coin out of the air.

"Sure would be nice to have Applejack to help us," Monika remarked. She was sitting in the air with her eyes closed, focused an coding in an enclosure for the emus. "Or Winona, at least."

Yuri started pulling her hair, "What are the Admins *for* if they can't prevent this nonsense?!"

9.3 – What A Flop (by Masterweaver)

"...Hey, Monika?"

Monika looked up from her sketchpad. "Yes Yuri?"

Yuri bit her lip. "...I don't want to say you're not skilled," she began. "Because you are. What you've done, it's pretty amazing... It's just, um..."

"Just what?"

"Didn't... didn't you go to the Matrix one loop? And learn coding there?"

Monika sighed, putting down her pencil. "I see where this is going. Why isn't this as accurate as the Matrix, right?"

Yuri held up her hands. "I'm just curious, I don't need to actually know. And what we've got is great, but-"

"The average human brain operates at about one exaflops, which is about a thousand petaflops. The Matrix makes due with two hundred petaflops on average-at least, the version I looped into, which is still a lot. We, on the other hand, are generally in an early twenty-first century desktop computer. Care to guess how many floating point operations per second we've got?"

"...a lot less?" Yuri hazarded. "Two petaflops, maybe?"

"Around fifty gigaflops. *Giga* , Yuri. It takes a *million* gigaflops to make *one* petaflops! And that's just *one* aspect of the entire business!"

"Ah," said Yuri.

Monika threw up her hands. "It's like... it's like I've studied all the tricks to make the Burj Khalifa and I only have materials to make a two, maybe three story house! And sure it's an incredible house and it's got all the... stuff, but... I don't know, Yuri, it's a system thing. There are a lot of cheats. A lot. The fact you haven't noticed, that's... comforting. But..."

She sighed.

"Hey." Yuri sat down next to her. "I'm not complaining. I just... wanted to know. You know? You're doing great with what we got."

Monika went back to sketching. "I know, I know... just... if I had more to work with, everything would be better."

"Ah," Yuri said sagely, "a universal woe."

Monika managed a chuckle. "Yeah, yeah... I get it, I just-"

"Feel a constant need to make up for baseline and a constant frustration when you can't." Yuri laughed at Monika's pointed glare. "Oh, come on, Prez, it's not like we all don't know already."

"I know, I know..." Monika turned back to her sketchpad. "And I guess I should count my blessings. I mean, I only really need to work on this room and a few others... and when it comes to body simulation I think I've got the four and a half of us down pat... and it's not like I absolutely must hide everything."

"There you go then!" Yuri patted her shoulder. "And we usually fool visiting loopers, right? They think we're in a flesh and blood world until we tell them."

Monika nodded, and then frowned. "I wonder what would happen if somebody tried to unpocket a faster-operating computer while in this loop?"

Yuri paused.

"...Let's not try it," she suggested eventually. "Or wait until it's a lonely loop. Because that distinctly smells of loop crashing potential."

9.4 – Operational Ceiling (by Masterweaver)

There were a number of tricks Monika used to make her world more habitable for her and her friends while working with limited resources. One was simply... reduction.

It was an open, usually unspoken secret that she restricted her reality to six chambers. One was the club-room itself, something she paid strict attention to and kept uniformly identical between loops. The only unique aspect was that the door would open to one of four bedrooms-there had originally been only three, but after some time Monika had caved and, somewhat guiltily, coded herself up a private area with some walls she could go to when she needed to think. The girls had commented on the oddity of having one door that opened, whenever they wanted, to their own personal quarters, but after

Monika explained the situation they agreed it sort of made sense; Yuri had approved of the way Monika ensured privacy by only allowing each girl access to their own bedroom.

The final chamber, which the door opened to whenever they did not wish to enter their private chambers, had been affectionately nicknamed the Holodeck by Natsuki.

It could serve as anything-the rest of the school, an outdoor street, a water park, the moon-whatever the girls were feeling up to. Monika used it to test her coding abilities in private, and when the girls wanted to sleep they would stick Hiroaka in there in his own private bedroom, to be retrieved the next day. Given the various other limitations the girls had in their loop, and the fact they were essentially the only ones in their reality, they considered it a fair trade. For the most part, it was a nice way to stretch their limbs.

But, still... everything had its limits.

Monika looked around the glitching landscape, noting the trees replaced with ERROR in big blue letters and the various untextured apartments.

"O...kay." She held up a hand. "So. We've learned that attempting to have a giant mecha duel can, in fact, crash the program."

Behind her, Natsuki chuckled awkwardly. "Yeah... yeah, I guess we have."

"Especially when we launch a hundred missiles at once."

Yuri bit her lip.

"While throwing lasers everywhere."

"I hit the wrong button," Sayori protested weakly.

Monika sighed. "Right." Through force of will, she summoned the door and opened it. "Everybody, into the club. I'll clean this up, and

we can plan for a more... reasonable action-filled scenario."

"The program was able to support Remnant Ball," Natsuki grumbled as she stepped through. "What's wrong with mechas?"

"Maybe we shouldn't have gone with a Battletech mecha, and stuck to something more logistically cohesive," Yuri suggested. "Like a Gundam. Do people worry about individual subsystems or is it just One Giant Robot?"

"Sorry Monika," Sayori said. "Really, this seemed like fun and-"

"No, it's fine. It's not your fault." Monika glowered at the flickering sky. "It's this stupidly limited computer we're trapped in. Gah, sometimes I wish I were back in the Matrix..."

9.5 – Do-kai Yo-kai, Pt. 1 (by Black Omachao)

"Is something wrong Keita-kun? Whissu," the UnAwake Whisper asked as he followed his master/friend to school, the young boy not looking very enthusiastic.

"Well…" Keita, having only just Woken up, skimmed through his memories, "Whisper, have you noticed Fumika and her friends have been acting… odd lately?"

"What do you mean by odd? Whiss," the ghost questioned with a confused look, Keita sighed.

"Well, not that I'm complaining, but Fumi-chan's been wanting me to spend a lot more time with her the past week, without Kanchi and Kuma that is. On top of that Mika's been trying to get me to play sports with her, and Satoko keeps trying to invite me to go out with her… and the three of them keep getting all passive-aggressive about it towards each other…" Keita muttered the last part uncomfortably, Whisper hummed in thought, before nodding.

"I see. Well, I assure you it's nothing to be concerned about, Keita-kun," Whisper smiled with his arms crossed, "Those three girls are simply at the age where they have started to notice boys, you're a fairly frequent appearance in each of their lives so you're the lucky fella they've decided to focus that attention on for the time being, whissu."

"I am not feeling lucky, if that's the excuse," Keita grunted in annoyance, "If that is the case, why me alone? Why not Kanchi or Kuma? Heck, why not Mao?"

"I wouldn't try thinking too hard about it if I were you, whissu," Whisper stated in a wise tone, "The crushes of young girls can happen for no decipherable rhyme or reason, Keita-kun, not to worry, it's simply a faze. Soon those girls will realize there's nothing really special about you and turn their focus to other potential romantic partners," the yo-kai butler assured smugly, Keita glared at him.

"Oh, is that so…?" the boy's eyes flashed blue, Whisper wasn't sure why, but he suddenly felt a shiver travel down his nonexistent spine, Keita's eyes narrowed… before he gained a cheerful smile and nodded, "Ah yes, you're probably right. There's nothing special about me whatsoever, soon they will be back to normal and I can go back to catching bugs with Fumika, Kanchi and Kuma and not worry about girls, thanks Whisper," as the young watch-holder continued on his way to school, the ghostly butler remained in his spot with a look of confusion and terror on his face.

"What… was that feeling just now? Whissu…"

9.6 – Getting Ready For The Wedding!

"OKAY, EVERYONE!" Sayori exclaimed all of a sudden, bursting into the clubroom. Monika, Yuri, and Natsuki had all been sitting around a table going over some notes; it was Saturday, so there was no reason for Sayori or Hiroaka to be at school.

"Excuse me?" asked Monika with a cocked eyebrow.

"I just Woke Up in the Looping sense," Sayori explained as she dropped into an empty seat on the side opposite to Monika, "And going by my memories I'm pretty sure everyone else is Awake too, yeah?"

"Yeah," replied Natsuki.

"Indeed," said Yuri.

"Okay but why are you stealing my thing?" Monika demanded.

"Ha!" cried out Natsuki, pointing at Monika triumphantly, "You finally admitted that it's your catchphrase!"

Monika ignored her.

"Oh, come off it Mony. I'm VP, I can use it too, right?" said Sayori. "But anyways…we're all Awake! Which means it's time we made our preparations for the–" Sayori paused and drew a deep breath before screaming, "WEEEEEEEEEEEEEDDIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIING!"

Monika, Yuri, and Natsuki waited a moment before tentatively lowering their hands from their ears.

"Right, that thing Blake invited us to," Yuri sighed. Everyone stared at her.

"Don't tell me you're not looking forward to it," asked Natsuki. The look on Sayori's face plainly showed that she was thinking the same thing, but was too horrified by the thought to speak.

"Oh, no, of course I am!" Yuri said quickly, and a bit too loudly, "It's just…uuuhh…"

"Gah!" Sayori squeaked, "She's doing the hair thing! *She's doing the hair thing!* "

And, indeed, Yuri was fidgeting with strands of her long, luscious, lavender locks wound around her fingers. An indicator that she was

extremely anxious, and something she did with ever-increasing infrequency since becoming a Looper.

"Ah," said Monika in a tone of dawning comprehension, "I see… formal marriage between Loopers is a very rare, and therefore a very notable occurrence. It's bound to be a big event, likely with a good deal of guests. Most of whom are likely going to be Loopers. So you're nervous about making a good impression on a lot of new faces, am I right?"

Yuri nodded, letting go of her hair. "Yeah…that's about it…and, y'know, introvert. Even if it is fun–and I'm sure it will be–it's also guaranteed to be *exhausting* on a psychological level." Then she took a deep breathe, looked up from her desk, and smiled. "Still, like so few things in the Loops, this will be a truly once-in-eternity event, so I'll be sure to enjoy it as much as possible."

"Right, right, whatever!" said Sayori with uncharacteristic impatience, "We have to talk *plans* ! What are we going to wear? How are we making our grand entrance? What kind of gift are we bringing? Are we all bringing one gift, or are we each bringing our own, or are we doing both individual gifts *and* a group gift? And most importantly, *what are we going to wear* ?!"

"You asked that twice," Monika pointed out.

"BECAUSE IT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT THING!" Sayori gushed, hearts sparkling in her eyes and the very air around her tinting pink.

'Next time I see Twilight, I need to ask her just what all Pinkie might have been able to teach my VP,' thought Monika.

Sayori stood up and slammed her hands down on the table. "We. Need. To. Plan! *Why* am I not hearing ideas, people?!"

"Hey, Veeps," said Natsuki, "Take a look at the papers you're crumpling."

"Eh?" Sayori looked down, picked up a paper and looked it over. Her eyes widened. "These…these are…"

"You remember how Blake explained the whole 'wedding armor' thing to us, right?" asked Natsuki. "Well, we talked it over and decided….well, besides me, none of us really care to wear armor, especially not to a party. And even I would much rather wear a nice dress to a wedding."

"So we decided to go with *metal* dresses," said Monika. "Naturally, it was Yuri's genius idea."

Yuri blushed, but her smile didn't diminish at all.

"Armor-Dresses…" Sayori whispered, awe-struck. "So…badass…"

"Yuri and I have mostly sorted out the designs for our own dresses. For Natsuki it's just a matter of making up her mind how many frills and lacy bits she wants," Monika added.

"Hey!" said Natsuki, "I already decided to forgo the lace and aim for maximum frill."

"Maximum frill?" asked Yuri.

" *Maximum* frill," Natsuki stressed.

"My point being," said Monika placidly, "That we're all available to help you design yours, Sayori. We know how…ah…" Monika trailed off, looking for a more tactful synonym for what she was thinking.

"You're flighty as all get-out," said Natsuki bluntly, "So we all fully expect you to change your mind and completely overhaul your design concept several times," Natsuki paused and took a sip from her juice box, before tacking on, "Per loop."

Sayori sighed. "Yeah…that's fair. I am pretty wishy-washy."

"Ah…I would say you were more…whimsical," amended Yuri.

"Oh well, whatever! Let's get crackin'! Wait, what about gifts?!" asked Sayori suddenly, "And our grand entrance!"

"Um, Sayori? We don't even know where we'll be at the start of the 'Wedding Loop'. I mean, Remnant is probable, but we know that Earth and other life-bearing planets will be part of the loop, so we need a contingency for that…" Monika trailed off thoughtfully, again. Then she gave herself a shake and returned to her original thought, "But more importantly…we're going as guests, Sayori. To a *wedding* . As in, two specific people's "Special Day". Making a strong first impression is important, yes, particularly since we'll be meeting a lot of Loopers for the first time. But…in moderation, alright?"

"Eh?" asked Sayori.

"What she means is that we need to reign in our mad style, lest we give the false impression of trying to steal the spotlight from *the brides* ," Natsuki clarified.

"Oh," Sayori's eyes widened with realization. "Well, obviously we don't want to do *that* …"

"And about the gifts," said Yuri, "I actually had a thought about that… we all got to know Blake a bit, the week she was with us. But we don't really know much about Yang, besides what Blake told us. So…I was thinking…maybe we can all get something personal for Blake, and then work together to come up with something Yang might like?"

"Or, we could each get a gift for each of them!" exclaimed Sayori excitedly, "And we could each get a gift for *both* of them! And a group gift for both of them! *And* a group gift for *each* –"

"Sayori!" Monika cried out, holding back laughter, "Your enthusiasm is appreciated, but I think four people giving the happy couple *eighteen* separate gifts might be seen as…ah-heh…"

"Kiss-ass-y" Natsuki interjected. "Now, as the *sanest* member of the Club, here's my counter-proposal: since one traditionally gives a gift to the couple as a unit, I say we do that. Each of us prepares one gift, for the both of them. And, as a group, we could also work together on composing a poem for the occasion. I mean, we're pretty kickass poets, in case y'all forgot."

"Counter-counter-proposal," said Yuri, "Historically speaking, our different writing styles don't always mesh too well. So we should invert your idea, Natsuki."

"Individual poems, and a group gift?" surmised Sayori, "Sounds good to me!"

"I'm not above *trying* to do another group project poem," said Monika, "But if you're cool with Yuri's idea, Nat, then so am I."

Natsuki smiled and shrugged, "Fair enough. Then we're agreed?" The other three nodded.

"We're agreed," said Monika. "And the second point I meant to make earlier; we don't yet know *how* we're starting the Wedding Loop, so no point planning our entrance until then. So that just leaves the matter of our attire."

And with that, the girls spent the rest of the loop exercising their inner fashionistas.

9.7 – Disturbing Images (by Wookywok)

"Hey, Monika?"

The club president briefly turned away from her piano. "Yeah, Natsuki? What's up?"

"Well, I've been doing a lot of thinking about something, and… it's troubling me." The pinkette held her hands up defensively. "I want you to know, this is about Baseline, and it does relate to what you

did, but that's not the main point. If you're not comfortable hearing this, I'll go share my thoughts with Sayori or something - but I feel you should think about this."

Monika let out a small sigh. "Sure. Hit me."

Natsuki put her hands down. "Okay. First, common knowledge: We live in a game, and everything goes downhill once you start messing with everything - including Sayori and Yuri both committing suicide, and - most importantly for this - me throwing up."

Monika nodded affirmatively.

"And part of everything going downhill includes the graphics glitching out, because you, of your own admission, can't sprite to save your life," the tsundere continued.

Monika nodded again, slower this time. "And… your point? Because right now, it does sound like what I did is the main point."

"I was just about to get to that," said the pink-haired girl. "You see, you can't edit sprites. And, if things continued as normal, we can safely assume I wouldn't have lost my lunch. *So why do I have a fully drawn sprite for puking my guts out?* "

The brunette's eyes widened. "You're… you're right."

"For that matter, why does Sayori have a fully drawn CG for hanging herself? Why does Yuri have two sprites and a CG for stabbing herself to death? Heck, why do YOU have a CG for sitting in a room, staring at the fourth wall? It's a conspiracy, I tell ya!"

The club president placed her head in her hand. "I… don't know what to tell you. It's… one of those things we can't explain." She gave a sheepish grin. "Uh… wait for an expansion?"

"Like that's gonna happen with us," replied Natsuki. "Ugh, this is making my head hurt. I'm gonna go read some manga and think

about this later."

9.8 – Do-kai Yo-kai, Pt. 2 (by Black Omachao)

Keita stepped into his classroom, just before class would begin, he looked his classmates as he walked towards his seat.

"Everything seems relatively normal…" the Anchor muttered to himself, Whisper gave him a quizzical look as he followed behind.

"Keita-kun!" Fumika stood up from her seat with a big smile as she approached the boy, "Good to see you!"

"Yeah, hi Fumi-chan…" Keita nodded to his crush, giving her a suspicious look, Fumika didn't seem to notice as she kept her cheerful demeanor.

"So, how's your day been so far? Anything cool happen on the way to school… oh! How about you sit next to me in class today?" the UnAwake girl offered, Keita gave her a questioning look.

"But… that's not where I sit, and neither of the seats next to you are free…" the boy pointed out bluntly.

"Fumi-chan wants you to sit next to her and you're questioning it? Who are you and what have you done with Keita-kun!?" Whisper exclaimed out of shock, Keita chose to ignore him.

"Hold it!" Satoko's voice suddenly interjected, she came from behind Fumika with an angry look on her face, but it was quickly replaced with a friendly smile when her eyes met Keita's, "Hey Keita-kun, you always spend so much time paying attention to Fumika, but never me, why don't you sit by me instead?" Fumika glared at her dark-haired friend as Keita let out a sigh at this situation.

"That's because we aren't really close, Hayashi-chan, why are you suddenly so interested in spending time with me?" as he spoke, Keita subtly used his yo-kai watch to scan the room, but he couldn't

seem to find any sign of a yo-kai, the same as when his UnAwake-self checked, according to his memories, his eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, you guys barely have anything in common anyway, so maybe you should just stop bugging Keita-kun," Mika spoke up as she walked over to both Fumika and Satoko, both giving her annoyed glares, "But she is right about Fumika taking up all your time, how about we play soccer after class? Just you and me?" the tanned girl gave a smirk.

"I don't think you can play soccer with just two people," the Anchor countered with a groan, before any arguments could be made, the bell rang, signelling that class would be beginning shortly, "Look, we can talk more later, but I should really take me seat," Keita moved towards his seat, a little creeped out that he could almost claim to feel the three girls' eyes following him as he moved to his chair.

"Well… you handled that a lot better than yesterday, I'll admit I expected you to get all flustered again, whiss," Whisper said as he hovered by the boy's seat, Keita just nodded with a thoughtful expression.

"I can't find a yo-kai inspiriting them, but this is not normal behavior… hoping this isn't just another 'Harem Loop…'" Keita muttered a bit to himself, he glanced around the classroom and nearly reeled back when he saw the three girls staring at him intensely from each of their seats, he quickly looked away and shook his head, ' *I don't want to imagine such a creepy look coming from Fumi-chan, even an UnAwake one, without some external cause…* '

"Dude, what did you do? Those three are all over you lately," Kanchi questioned from his seat, Keita sighed as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I have no idea, Kanchi, I just have no idea…"

…

Keita snuck through the halls of the school with narrowed eyes, it was now lunch time, and had luckily managed to escape from Fumika, Satoko and Mika's attempts to get him to sit with each of them, *away* from the other two, and snuck out of the cafeteria without anyone noticing.

"Keita, what exactly are you doing? Whissu," Whisper questioned as he floated up behind the Looper.

"I have reason to believe that Fumi-chan and her friends are being inspirited, so I'm looking for a yo-kai…" Keita answered simply, shining the watch's light around as he moved through the halls. Whisper shook his head disapprovingly.

"Keita, Keita, Keita, there you go again with that nasty habit of yours for blaming yo-kai for everything, strange, sudden interest in you aside, we already checked and there was no yo-kai around them, whiss," the yo-kai butler chastised, Keita barely acknowledged his words as he approached the computer lab.

"Don't you remember when Gurerurin was inspiriting Kanchi? The affects didn't stop, even when they were separated, so couldn't the same logic apply to what's going on with Fumi-chan, Satoko and Mika?" Keita looked suspiciously at the computer lab's door, ' *Computer lab… has this room always been here?* '

"That was one person, Keita-kun. For a yo-kai to be able to keep inspiriting three separate people while being apart from all of them it would need to be a very powerful yo-kai, plus I've never heard of a yo-kai that makes girls obsess over a boy! Whissu."

"Yakimochi, Motemoten, Motemacool…" the Anchor muttered under his breath as he opened the door, he stepped into the room and started shining the light around.

"I'm telling you, there is no yo-kai. And, even on the highly improbable chance that I'm wrong, such a yo-kai would not be found in a compu– "

"Found it!"

"WHAT!? WHISSU!" Whisper's eyes nearly bulged out of his head as Keita's yo-kai watch revealed a yo-kai hovering over one of the computers; resembling a highschool girl, with pale skin, glowing green eyes, and pink hair with a ponytail that split off into three tentacles, the tips of which were each glowing.

"Oh my, it seems I've been found…" the yo-kai spoke, sounding a little emberrased, Whisper started looking through his yo-kai pad, Keita noticed a Ping and sent out his own, noting that the yo-kai did react.

"So, are you the one inspiriting my friends?" the Anchor asked carefully, the visiting Looper tapped her fingers together nervously.

"Well, see the thing about that is– "

"Found it! That's Monika!" Whisper suddenly exclaimed, pointing towards the girl, "She can use her influence to cause a group of girls that are normally the best of friends to become obsessed with the same boy and fight each other over him, destroying their friendships in the process! Whissu!" Whisper shouted accusingly, Keita noticed as Monika looked down in shame, "She's the yo-kai that makes you go; 'Eh, why are all those girls fighting? They've always been such good friends, but suddenly all they care about is that new guy,' whissu."

"Great…" Keita stated sarcastically, before looking towards Monika, "So, I take it from your body-language that you're not exactly proud of that description."

"You could… say that," Monika nodded, giving a sigh as she looked back at him.

9.9 – It's A Fine Night Tonight, Wouldn't You Agree? Part 2 (7.10 cont.)

Yuri was a passionate person. She generally kept it covered up, but when she was engaged with something she *burned* with vigor all the way down to the depths of her soul. That being said, she knew the value of keeping a clear head in the heat of battle. With a pen in hand, her mind was a firestorm. With a blade, however, she was as cold as ice. Berserking was more Natsuki's shtick, if anything. Tonight, however, she freely vented her mounting frustration through her new blade, a masterwork silver-edged katana crafted by the weaponsmiths of the Hellsing Organization, given to her as a gift by Sir Integra; apparently Yuri had greatly impressed the noblewoman with her poise and manners. With it, enemy vampires were much easier to eliminate. Ghouls, she now dispatched with hardly a thought.

"You know, I wouldn't have figured you for being such a savage warrior, based on our first encounter," commented the source of her frustrations from where he stood on the other side of the formerly ghoul-infested ballroom.

"I'll admit that I'm a bit…less than composed," Yuri ceded as she wiped the gore off of her blade before sheathing it.

"That much is obvious; don't bore me with the banal, child," Alucard scoffed as he crossed the corpse-riddled floor.

"Look, I get that you're hesitant to turn me…I imagine that you've had to put up with a lot of Loopers hounding you to share your amazing power with them, even though they don't understand the meaning behind that power. But I swear to you, if anyone was truly born to *be* a Creature of the Eternal Night, it's me! What can I do to convince you, sir?" Yuri pleaded as she followed him.

"For starters? Keep your mind on the mission," he replied bluntly, phasing right through the wall.

Yuri rolled her eyes. Her hands blurred, and without breaking stride she seemingly disintegrated a large enough hole in the wall to follow the vampire. She followed him up a stairwell and they cut through

more ghouls; he with his guns and she with her blade. Somewhere, on one of the upper floors, a whole coven of vampires was waiting for them. They had made ghouls out of every human being that had been in the hotel, guests and staff alike.

Such base gluttony disgusted Yuri. It was, in her enlightened opinion, undignified; behavior unfitting for an Immortal.

"Let me take point," said Yuri as they neared the room where, according to Alucard's heightened senses, the coven lay in wait. Without waiting for permission, she pushed ahead of him and sheathed her katana. She kept a hand on the sheath as well as the hilt, primed for a *battoujutsu* strike.

"There are at least a dozen of Millennium's pale experiments in there, Yuri," Alucard reminded her, "Even with the strength, speed, and reflexes that come with the level of training and experience that only Loopers can attain, you're still presently bound by the limitations of a human form. If you insist on taking them head-on, at least tap into any Out-of-Loop powers you might have. You're an interesting young woman; I'd be sorely disappointed if your recklessness were to cut short our time together."

Yuri only snorted before kicking in the door. She immediately made a standing leap straight up, grabbed the top of the doorframe, flipped herself up and planted her feet on the wall and sprang off towards the middle of the room. Gunfire filled the doorway she had just been standing in. She landed in the middle of a group of gun-toting ghouls. Most of them were bisected by her first swing, and the rest followed in the blink of an eye.

Then Yuri felt a gloved hand on her shoulder, and then she was ensconced in darkness. She found herself standing in what could be considered a quaint, picturesque countryside. If one were found of Stygian hellscapes with rivers of blood and mountains of corpses. Shrieks of the damned echoed in the distance, and a baleful red sun shone down. "Did he…Pocket me?" Yuri asked herself, looking

around. "Hmm. If I'm being honest with myself, I'm rather disappointed. I had taken him for being more creative than this."

Then she was back in the hotel suite. Alucard was looking down at her with a somewhat amused expression. There were no other vampires in sight, nor any sign of the ghouls she had cut down. "What happened?" she asked.

"Our Master has recalled us," said Alucard, "So we have no more time to lollygag about, I'm afraid."

"I see," said Yuri, heading towards the door.

"Halt," Alucard ordered gently, "In case I hadn't been clear, Sir Integra has recalled us *with all due haste* . Time being of the essence, I shall translocate us there."

"Right, you're Schrödinger's Vampire," said Yuri, returning to Alucard's side. "By the way, please tell me your *entire* Pocket isn't like that? Because I have to be honest; that whole scene was just… uninspired. Trite. Hackneyed. *Vapid* , even. Was I mistaken in thinking you were a vampire of good taste?"

"Oh, you are a *doll* ," Alucard chuckled, "That was the part of my Pocket I use for messing with people. I'll be sure to give you a personal tour of the *good* parts."

"Well, I'm sure you can't have any *worse* parts," said Yuri. She frowned. "I'm sorry, I'm being very rude and uncharitable today. I'm frustrated and grouchy, and even if it is your fault it doesn't excuse my juvenile attitude about this."

"How very mature of you," Sir Integra Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing remarked wryly.

Yuri squeaked and jumped back. She realized that they were now standing in Integra's study. Alucard chuckled. "Bastard," Yuri growled at him.

There was a sudden choking noise, followed by "Holy *shit* , Yuri, who pissed in your Cheerios?"

"Monika?!" Yuri gasped, turning to the woman sitting on the other side of Integra's desk with a cup of coffee in her hands, and a little coffee now staining her…lab coat? "What are–when did you– *huh* ?!"

"Tisk, tisk, whatever has become of your unflappable calm?" asked Alucard.

"Yuri? Unflappable?" asked Monika. Then she started snickering.

"You two know each other, then,"Alucard observed.

"Indeed," said Integra, "This is Yuri's Anchor. She's replaced Herr Doktor this loop. On a side note, it would seem we're going to have no trouble with Millennium this loop."

Alucard frowned, and turned to face Monika. "You bested them all?"

"A battalion of Waffen-SS commandos enhanced with artificial vampirism, plus a werewolf?" asked Monika with a cocked eyebrow, "It was hardly a workout. Picked up a neat new weapon, though." Rip Van Winkle's musket appeared in her hand. "Granted, I prefer handguns, but anything with magical homing bullets I'm happy to work with. I destroyed fifteen tanks and three zeppelins with *one shot* with this thing."

"Hmm. Not bad, for a Looper young enough to be unknown to me," remarked Alucard. Then he grinned, "You like guns, do you?"

Yuri suddenly felt a shift in the atmosphere of the room, and she knew exactly what it was. Monika could generally be counted on to be the most rational and level-headed of the club. The one consistent exception to this…was when she crossed paths with a fellow gunslinger.

By the time the first shots had rang out, Yuri had already leaped across the room, tackled Integra to the ground, and slapped down a Bubble Shield.

Alucard, naturally, had drawn his guns and shot first, but Monika had still been quick enough to negate the advantage; she had kicked back from Integra's desk with one foot, knocking her chair over. She had already gotten her other foot under her butt, and as her chair tipped back she launched herself backwards out of it, while Alucard's first shots wheezed through now-empty space. While he tried to track her, his guns now ripping the still-falling chair to splinters, and while Monika was still sailing backwards through the air in a very John Woo-esque style, she raised her new musket and fired it at Alucard.

The recoil from the shot sent her flying back even faster, while the magic bullet bounced back and forth between the relatively mundane silver bullets fired from Casull and Jackal, until finally ripping through Alucard's wrists and severing his hands, causing his guns to fall to the floor. While his fingers kept twitching, the guns' magazines were already empty. By the time that happened, however, Monika had already Unpocketed a Colt Single Action Army revolver in her other hand and sent two shots straight through Alucard's head, blowing it into a cloud of gore and red mist, and sent the remaining four shots into his chest.

Finally, she hit the floor on her back and immediately jumped back up to her feet, putting the musket and revolver back in her Pocket and replacing them with a pair of UNSC M6Ds. She shrugged off her lab coat, and a dark-green "light armor" hardsuit appeared over her body, mass effect kinetic barriers pulsing and shimmering into existence over her body. She didn't Unpocket a helmet, however.

"Cute," grunted Integra as she pushed Yuri off of her, pulled out a wand and tapped it to the shield generator, causing the barrier to take on a magical, violet hue. "So your Anchor is a Blood Knight, too? And she seemed so sensible."

"Oh, no!" said Yuri quickly, "Monika hasn't an ounce of bloodlust in her…just a very strong competitive streak."

"Oh, *YES* !" Alucard roared as soon as his head had mostly regenerated, his tone of voice suddenly very different than it had been up until now, "You may be young but you're *spirited* . You world must be a real Hell to turn out girls like you and Yuri. And that wouldn't happen to have been one of Ocelot's custom jobs, was it?"

"No, it was one of my customs. I did get a few tips from Mr. Ocelot, though. And if you think Yuri and I are 'spirited', then you'd just adore Natsuki," Monika remarked with a smile, holding her pistols up while she waited for Alucard to finish recovering. "Sadly, I don't have any regenerative abilities, so if we're going to do this–"

"Oh, you bet your sweet ass we're doing this," Alucard said with relish.

"Then I'll have to ask that you consider me beaten *if* you manage to wear down my shields," Monika finished.

"Is…is something wrong with Alucard?" Yuri asked Integra, "He's giving off a very different presence all of a sudden…as if he's someone else."

"Well, 'wrong' is subjective, I suppose," Integra grumbled, lighting a cigar, "But no, this is just a 'Variant' persona he assumes, sometimes, whenever the mood strikes him. We call it…the Crimson Fucker."

Yuri could only blink and stare blankly.

Meanwhile, Alucard had fully regenerated, picked up his guns, and reloaded. "Aaaaaaalrighty then, Monika, was it? Let's–"

Monika closed the distance between them and shoulder-checked him with a Biotic Charge, sounding him flying backwards and

opening fire with both of her hand cannons. "Dance?" she asked him over the roar of gunfire as she ripped his torso to gibs. "Yes, let's."

By the time Alucard wore down Monika barriers and managed to put a bullet in her shoulder, they had demolished most of the mansion, and Monika had used almost all of the ammunition in her Pocket.

9.10 – Yuri: Knife Knave Ninja (by Awesomedude17)

Appearing in a poof of smoke, Yuri noticed the looks she was getting and decided to speak up.

"I took up ninjutsu recently."

"We figured," Natsuki said matter-of-factly. "I'm more focused on the fact that you literally covered your body in knives. Why?"

"You need a weapon in the event you are ambushed."

"Okay, one, you're a high schooler. What enemies do you have that could reasonably attack you. Two, there's only the five of us that exist here. Finally, you don't need all those knives."

Yuri scratched the back of her head. "Actually, those are good points. I'm not stopping though."

"Typical."

9.11 – Do-kai Yo-kai, Pt. 3 (by Black Omachao)

"I see, so you can't really stop yourself from inspiriting people," Keita concluded after getting an explanation from Monika, the visiting Looper nodded.

"Yes, I don't mean to make friends fight, but when I'm around it just sort of happens…" she let out a depressed sigh, gripping the tentacles that sprouted from her hair, "All three lights are still active, that means the girls are still in the 'running' to win your heart, once

only one is left and a girl has 'won,' the inspiritment should wear off… but it's often at the cost of the girls' friendships…"

"I see, that's troublesome," the Anchor muttered thoughtfully, Whisper nodded in agreement, "So you don't know how to stop the inspiritment without one of them 'winning?'"

"But by that point their friendship will likely be ruined beyond fixing! Whissu!" the yo-kai butler exclaimed dramatically, Keita sighed.

"Yeah… plus I'm not ready to date," at this comment, Whisper gave the Anchor a strange look.

"Not ready to date? But what of all your pining after Fumi-chan!? Whissu!"

"That's a topic for another day, Whisper…" Keita grumbled as he averted his eyes, "The fact of the matter is, we need to find a way to snap those three out of this…" the Anchor looked to be in thought for a few more seconds, before he seemed to get an idea, "Whisper…"

"Um, yes Keita-kun? Whissu…"

"Do you think you can go to the yo-kai world and see if you could find anything that could help with the situation, anything at all that you think might help," the human boy pleaded, the yo-kai butler stared at him with a look of slight shock, before shaking his body and giving a salute.

"Why of course Keita-kun! Your faithful yo-kai butler will not let you down! Whissu!" Whisper gave an enthusiastic shout, before flying out of the room, Keita waved while Monika stared with an unsure expression, before the Anchor nodded.

"Now that he's gone…" he turned his attention back to the visitor, "Let's have another talk, Looper-to-Looper…"

"… Yes, let's," the visiting Looper nodded back to him, giving a small smile.

"I can tell you're not comfortable with what your inspiritment is doing to my friends, so I'm sure you really don't know of a way to undo it in a simple manner…"

"Yeah, it… hits a little close to home," Monika admitted with a frown, "Though I fudged the truth a little on how I ended up inspiriting them; my UnAwake-self actually did it on purpose, gleefully in fact. I Woke up soon after, but it seems while my current form can easily inspirit a group of girls, uninspiriting them is not so simple."

"Waking up soon after your UnAwake-self does something stupid, and you don't know how to fix it?" Keita muttered with a nod, "That sucks…"

"Yeah, it does," Monika brushed a bit of her hair to the side with a small grumble, "I am sorry about your friends, I just don't know how I could fix it…" Keita smiled.

"Don't worry about it, I can nullify that inspiritment no problem," at the cheerful assurance from the local Anchor, Monika gave him a blank expression.

"… Wait, you can just fix this? Than why haven't you yet!?"

"Well, Whisper's not Awake, and I didn't want to try to explain to him why I can just nullify a yo-kai's inspiritment," Keita explained with a shrug, "Plus, I wasn't sure if they were being inspirited, since I couldn't find anything. But now that I've found you, and Whisper's out of the room, I can just cancel your powers and give Whisper some other excuse when he gets back…"

"Well, fine, why not," Monika shrugged back to the other Anchor, before letting out an annoyed sigh, "Sheesh, I really thought I screwed something up here for a second…"

"No, but your concern is appreciated," Keita smiled as his body was surrounded by a blue aura, Monika felt her yo-kai abilities being suppressed as the boy held out his hand towards her, "There, Fumika, Satoko and Mika should be back to normal by the time we get back to class…"

"That's good to hear," Monika sighed as she hovered around the room, glancing at some of the computers with an unreadable expression, Keita kept his eyes on her as she moved around.

"So… you want to talk about anything else…? Oh right!" the boy took a quick look in his pocket, before pulling out a yo-kai watch, Monika looked at him strangely, "Standard procedure, every first-timer to our Loop gets a yo-kai watch!" the human grinned as the visiting Anchor took the watch and looked it over curiously.

"Oh, well thank you, not sure how useful this will be back home though," she smiled sheepishly, Keita chuckled.

"I know, but it's still nice to have, especially if you ever end up back here as a human, it also tends to work in most other Branches with invisible spirits or creatures of sorts…" Keita reached into his pocket again and handed Monika a medal depicting Fuu2.

"Huh, a yo-kai medal?" the humanoid yo-kai took the medal, her in-Loop memories informing her on what the object was.

"That's my yo-kai form; Fuu2. We're friends now, so it makes sense to give you that," Keita nodded.

"Isn't it a little soon to start calling me your friend?" Monika questioned skeptically, Keita looked at her with a tilt of his head.

"Huh… is it? I didn't think so, you seem nice, you didn't cause any trouble on purpose, I don't see why we shouldn't be friends," Keita muttered thoughtfully, "Though… if you don't want to be I suppose I shouldn't try and force the idea…"

"No, it's fine," Monika quickly assured the child, waving her hands a bit after pocketing the watch and medal, "It was just a little surprising is all, that you'd want us to be friends so soon after meeting…"

"I suppose I can be a bit too quick to call someone my friend, that's just how it usually is with yo-kai I meet," Keita admitted with a shrug, Monika let out a small laugh, before handing the boy a medal depicting her current form.

"Well, if you're going to give me your medal, I might as well give you mine as well… even if I'm not usually like this."

"Thanks, Monika, I'll be sure to keep it safe with the medals of other Loopers I've met in yo-kai form," Keita smiled graciously as he took hold of the medal, before quickly storing it away, "So, do you mind if I ask what your home Loop is like?"

"No, I don't, though there really isn't much to say," the visiting Looper admitted unsurely, "My three friends and I live in a computer game, kind of… Well, it's technically four friends but… the fourth is…" Monika seemed to be struggling to find the proper words for what she was trying to say, "We thought he wasn't really anything, just a… puppet? Something with no mind of his own, but… lately… I don't know. I feel like things aren't so certain," Monika let out a defeated groan, "Sorry, I don't mean to start bringing this up with you, but it's… a difficult topic for my friends and I back home…"

"It's fine, you don't need to talk about it if you don't want to, but I'll listen if you want," Keita assured, Monika nodded, though it didn't look like she was planning to continue, "… So, you live in a computer game? What's that like?" Monika didn't have to think long on that.

"Well, to be honest it was pretty boring at first. Until I learned a bit more about coding, now I can do some interesting things back home," the visitor grinned, "Of course, programming some basic things like being able to eat I find necessary almost every Loop."

"You don't have that by default?"

"You'd be surprised what we don't have by default. But once I get the basic stuff out of the way, there are some other directions that I can go…"

…

"I can't believe Monika was able to just 'figure out' how to turn off her inspiritment! And I looked all over for this 'harem-repellent, whissu!" Whisper lamented with a small shopping bag in hand, Keita sweatdropped, though he smiled at his incorporeal butler.

"Well, I thank you for the effort anyway, it was all kind of unexpected…" the Anchor assured as they stepped into the classroom, when he noticed Fumika talking with her friends in what appeared to be a friendly manner, his smile grew.

"Oh, Keita-kun," Fumika greeted as she took notice of him, Satoko and Mika smiled when they saw him, "Sorry about all that nonsense earlier, we don't know what came over us."

"No problem Fumi-chan, I'm just glad to see you back to normal," the Looping boy assured, Fumika Satoko and Mika all giggled a bit with slightly red tinted faces, "Huh…?" the Anchor took notice of this with a bit of suspicion.

"Yeah, it was so silly. After all, why fight over you…" Mika smirk as the three moved closer to the boy, Keita took a step back.

"When we can all spend time with you!" Satoko grinned.

"Though we haven't decided on a schedule yet, but we think on the weekend we should all spend time together, but for today maybe you should decide which you should spend time with," Fumika suggested, sharing a cheerful grin with her two friends, Keita's eye twitched.

"… I knew it! It was a Harem Loop in disguise all along!" the Anchor suddenly shouted, rushing out of the classroom, much to the shock

of his teacher and classmates.

"Amano-kun, you can't just– "the teacher started, but was interrupted by the three girls that rushed out the door after him.

"Keita-kun, where are you going!?" Fumika called out.

"You haven't even decided which of us you'll spend time with today yet!" Satoko added as she and Mika followed closely behind Fumika.

"Wait Keita-kun! The repellent! The repellent! Whissu!" Whisper shouted as quickly flew out of the room to catch up to the Anchor, the class was left in silence as the teacher tried to figure out what to do now. But out of the class, none were more confused than Kanchi and Kuma.

"… Hey, Kanchi," Kuma started, turning to his smaller friend.

"Yeah, Kuma?" the other boy responded blankly.

"What. Did. Keita. Do…?"

"I don't have any good answer for that Kuma, but I would very much like to know… for science," Kanchi stated firmly, Kuma looked like he didn't know how to respond to that, so they just sat in silence.

Compiler's Commentary:

9.1: Obviously **very** serious.

9.2: Yuri, quit being emo about the emus.

9.3: To be fair, Monika, getting even a heavily-bugged version of a simulation like the Matrix to operate with only fifty gigaflops is kind of like building a functional spaceship with Legos. So, you know… props.

9.4: Don't throw lasers and missiles inside digital houses, kids. At least, not more than your OS can support.

9.5: They say puberty is a perfectly natural phenomenon. Sometimes it's perfectly supernatural.

9.6: Sayori continues to demonstrate that weddings are **super-serious business** .

9.7: This does make me wonder, though, what relationship the DDLC Branch of Yggdrasil might have with the Project Libitina (assuming it will be called that) Branch, whenever Team Salvato finishes it. A bridge to burn when I cross it, I suppose.

9.8: Whisper continues to demonstrate why you can't depend on Wikipedia for all your infomongering needs.

9.9: Monika's a pro at Bullet Tag. Unfortunately, all the hit-and-run skill in the Multiverse still won't get you far in a 1v1 with a guy who's whole existence boils down to "Fuck you, that's how". Triply so when he's been Looping for eons longer than she has.

9.10: No one has as many points as Yuri. She has *all* the points. The best points. The pointiest points. *So many pointy points!*

9.11: If I were more familiar with Yo-kai Watch, I could probably make better comments about it. So I apologize for that.

Killer Glitches

Compiler's Commentary: The following is a Fused Loop, with the Doki-Dokies visiting the wild, wacky, and frequently gruesome world of one of my favorite anime/manga; Mirai Nikki, or "Future Diary" in English. The anime is faithful to the manga, and the English dub pretty good, though as always You Mileage May Vary. It can get pretty dark, but it isn't too graphic or gory. If you can handle Attack on Titan, Future Diary is no problem (and Yukiteru has the same English VA as Armin, too). If you like Black Lagoon, you'll definitely like Future Diary. And if you watch the anime, **do not forget** to watch the OVA, "Future Diary: Redial" afterwards. But anyways, enjoy!

Chapter 10 – Killer Glitches

(Doki Doki Literature Club!)/(Mirai Nikki/Future Diary)

(By Skaz Wolfman, yours truly)

Part 1

Yuri was enjoying this loop so far. It was a meatspace Loop, which meant she had a physical body to enjoy. Her Unawake self had been as big an introvert as she normally was, having no friends except for an imaginary one.

Who turned out to be God. Literally God. And the real kicker, for Yuri at least, was that His name was Deus X. Machina.

Then He upgraded her cellphone, in which her Unawake self had made random notes about everything she saw, so that it told her *the future* . For the next ninety days, in the form of her own 'random notes'.

It should go without saying that knowing what's going to happen before it happens is one of the most useful powers one can have, which made Yuri very sad that this loop was also a Null-type. Not

that it really mattered, seeing as the Future Diary was probably either Read-Only, or wouldn't work out-of-Loop anyways, seeing as its predictions came from the local God of Time and Space. Still, if nothing else, Yuri thought the cellphone itself would make a neat souvenir.

But then, less than a week after receiving the amazing gift from God, it suddenly changed. Most of the entries were inexplicably wiped clean and replaced by just one:

[16:30, Alleyway Behind The Antique Store]

The serial killer eviscerates me beautifully; it feels amazing.

-DEAD END-

"Ah…so the murderer that's been in the news all week is going to be the death of me, eh?" Yuri asked herself. She was sitting alone in her homeroom, the only student left, except for…

"I know you're there, Gasai-san. I can sense your presence," Yuri said without taking her eyes off the phone. She heard a loud, embarrassed squeak in reply. *'Gasai Yuno…she's been stalking me since I Awoke. Probably since long before that, but I can't tell by my Loop Memories. My Unawake self didn't have the trained senses to notice her. To be fair, my Baseline self wouldn't have noticed her, either. She's quite sneaky, and I was…withdrawn, to put it mildly. Only subjective centuries of honing my spatial awareness to compliment my combat training have made it so easy to detect her. Could she be the serial killer? No, unlikely. My diary's premonitions read just like my own random notations. If I knew the serial killer's identity, it would definitely be part of the premonition. That I refer to them as just 'the serial killer' means that I either wouldn't recognize them, or they were concealing their identity. Serial killers who pre-emptively stalk their victims typically make a point of letting them know who their killer is. Still, my sense of narrative is telling me that she isn't wholly unconnected to this latest 'plot twist', as it were.'*

All this passed through Yuri's mind in the short time between her calling Yuno out, and Yuno tentatively entering the room. She looked a little embarrassed. "Hey, Yuri…um, when did you–"

"It's been a year since we met, hasn't it?" Yuri asked abruptly, after sifting through her memories. "Have you been…ahem, 'watching' me, ever since that day?"

Yuno blushed. "Ah…a-ha…um…yeaaaaaaah…"

Yuri blinked. *'Is this how Baseline me acts towards Hiroaka? Wait… could it be? Is she…crushing on me?!'*

Yuri started blushing as well, quickly matching Yuno's own. "Um… you know, if you wanted…you c-could have just tried…a-asking me out?" Yuri suggested.

"I…well…um…" Yuno's brain appeared to have stalled out. Then she snapped out of it and pulled her own cellphone out. "I can't go out with a dead person, Yuri, and as I'm sure you've noticed you've been marked for death."

"Ah, so Deus gave you one too, then," Yuri observed.

Yuno stared at her.

Yuri grabbed her bag and started towards the door. "W-wait, what are you–where are you going, Yuri?" Yuno demanded, following her out of the classroom.

"I'm going to visit the antique store, as per my original plans for the day," Yuri replied honestly.

"You aren't even going to *try* to avoid your dead end?" Yuno boggled.

"Avoiding one's destiny is an exercise in futility, Gasai-san," Yuri replied coolly, "If one is to have any hope at all, they must face their destiny head-on."

"I'm coming with you!" Yuno immediately declared.

"I had a suspicion you would say that," said Yuri. "Just whatever you do, try not to get in my way. I don't mind an audience, but I don't want anyone getting hurt, other than my would-be assailant."

Yuri could all but *feel* Yuno bristle behind her. But she didn't say anything. So the two girls walked in silence…

…

As they approached the antique store, Yuri spoke up, "Gasai-san, if you insist on accompanying me further, I advise you take some measure to conceal your identity." As Yuri said this, she stuffed her long hair back into her hoodie and pulled the hood up over her head. From her bag she pulled a pair of sunglasses, which she put on, and a bandana, which she tied over her mouth. The end result being that her anonymity was quite secure.

"What are you planning, Yuri?" asked Yuno. She didn't sound concerned at all; only curious.

"The path of the swordsman is that of blood and death," Yuri replied mysteriously, "There is no honor in trying to cheat the reaper. Live by the sword, die by the sword. My life is sworn to the blade, so I need a blade to survive. I have my knives, but the diary described my death as an evisceration. That implies an…intimate range for the killing blow. So it would behoove me to fight with something that has a bit more reach…"

"You're going to steal an antique sword?" Yuno surmised.

"Precisely," said Yuri as she entered the antique store, which was thankfully more or less empty. Yuno was close behind her. "Oy, you, does this place have a back exit?" Yuri demanded of the bored-looking young man sitting behind the counter. She adopted a much rougher voice.

"Uh…yeah, whyyyyyy oh Godyou'reathief," the young man said frightfully as Yuri drew closer and he got a better look at her.

"Relax," said Yuri as she drew a knife out of her pocket. "Give me a serviceable sword, if you have one, and point me to the back exit. Do this, and you won't find out what your entrails look like," said Yuri dispassionately.

The man at the counter looked like he was going to piss himself, but he nodded and ran over to a nearby display case, which had a couple of different samurai weapons in it. A moment later he all but shoved a katana into her hands. Yuri drew it, examined the edge, tested the balance, gave it a few practice swings. She sheathed it and nodded. "The exit?" she prompted. The man nodded vigorously and turned around. As soon as he did, Yuri slammed the hilt of the sword into the back of his head. He crumpled instantly.

Yuri sighed. "Sorry for the inconvenience," she said to the unconscious figure as she stepped over his body. She found the back exit herself, easily enough, and soon she and Yuno both stood in the alley. They waited. Yuri pulled down her hood, took off her sunglasses and bandana, and threw her hair up into a bun. Then she drew her sword and did a little practicing with it.

Yuno watched her movements critically. "Say, when did you ever take up kendo anyways, Yuri?" she asked suspiciously.

"Oh…a lifetime ago, it feels like," Yuri replied, "Or more than one lifetime, I should say." She was too focused on what she was doing to notice the way Yuno's face went pale at this remark.

Yuno opened her mouth, but Yuri froze and hissed, "Hide, Gasai-san! A murderous presence draws near."

And right on cue, a tall figure in a trench coat appeared at the end of the alley. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and a gasmask, and he was armed with a wickedly serrated machete.

"A slasher-type, as I guessed," Yuri muttered. Yuno made no move to hide, so Yuri leaped forward to get between her and the serial killer, katana at the ready. If this surprised her aspiring murderer, his body language betrayed nothing. He only made to approach, slowly. "To hell with that nonsense," Yuri growled, rushing at the serial killer, ready to cleave him from shoulder to hip.

The serial killer's response was to stand stock-still, and as Yuri was about to strike he swung out with his machete, which easily shattered the infrequently-maintained four-hundred-year-old blade. Then he kicked Yuri in the chest, sending her flying back.

It was at this moment that Yuri knew…she fucked up.

' *Note to self: just because your imaginary friend is God and gives you a cell phone that tells you the future,'* Yuri thought as she rolled back onto her feet and jumped back away from the serial killer, drawing two knives out of her pockets, *'That doesn't necessarily mean that the universe you've Looped into is completely lacking in realism.'*

"Gasai-san, you should probably call the police," said Yuri, as the serial killer slowly advanced.

"Oh, there's no need for that, my love," replied Yuno as she stepped up. Her voice sounded subtly different now; most people might not have noticed, but Yuri prided herself on her attention to details. Up until now, Yuno's presence had been that of a more-or-less normal schoolgirl. But now she was different. She was…something else. "Yuno-chan will handle this miscreant for you," she said with a song in her voice as she deftly took one of Yuri's knives out of her hand.

' *Oh. A Yandere. Of course,'* thought Yuri.

Yuno gave a soft, girlish little giggle as she took off like an Olympic sprinter, charging right into their enemy before he could react. As he swung his weapon down at her, she pirouetted to his side and hooked one of his ankles with her foot, and with a mighty wrench of

her leg sent him toppling over onto his back. Then she kicked his weapon out of his hand, and then she kicked him *hard* in the head. Hard enough that his hat came off and he seemed to lose consciousness. The whole time, Yuno maintained a cheerful, carefree smile. She knelt down–

Three simultaneous bursts of static-y noise, just like the kind Yuri's cell made when it rewrote itself. Yuri quickly checked her diary, and her eyes widened in shock.

[16:30, Alleyway Behind The Antique Store]

Second kills Third, but Third was holding reality together. Oops.

-DEAD END-

Yuno had managed to remove the gasmask, and she was just about to plunge her knife into Third's throat, when Yuri tackled her to the ground. "NOPE! Nopenopenopenope," Yuri said quickly as she dragged a very confused Yuno away from the fallen killer.

"Yuri, what's wrong? If we don't kill her, she's going to–"

"If we kill *her* , this whole universe goes–" here Yuri made a loud popping sound with her mouth. "Like a soap bubble. No warning, just gone. And then her and I wind up in Eiken, or something. And not to put too blunt a point on it, Gasai-san, but my back problems are bad enough as it is. All that besides, she's a friend of mine. We'll all have a big laugh about this when she Wakes Up, I'm sure."

"What are you talking about?" asked Yuno, who had stood up and shaken off Yuri's grip. *'She's a lot stronger than she looks,'* Yuri thought. *'Heck, she's stronger than me!'*

Meanwhile, the unconscious person on the ground, who turned out to be a woman with long auburn hair, was already groaning and stirring as familiar green eyes fluttered open…

Yuri tried Pinging, but nothing happened, as she already knew would be the case. Yuno made a move towards the woman struggling to her feet, but Yuri quickly grabbed her and pulled her back. "M–eh, Hiyama-sensei? Are you…Awake?"

"Awake, yes. Who smacked me with an Anchor?" asked Monika as she stood up on wobbly legs.

"Oh thank Deus," Yuri exclaimed breathlessly. She let go of Yuno and rushed forth, slapping the lid off of a trashcan, grabbing Monika by the shoulders, and aiming her towards it.

"What are you– *oh my gods* ," Monika moaned in horror as she abruptly started throwing up into the trashcan. Yuri was already pulling her friend's long mane back with one hand and fishing around in her pockets with the other.

"Gasai-san, do you have a ribbon or a hair-tie we can use?" Yuri asked, glancing towards the pinkette. "And drop that knife right now!" she snapped, "Monika is…she's not our enemy anymore! She's remembered who she really is. Stay back, relax, we'll explain everything soon."

Yuno looked very skeptical. She didn't drop or even lower the knife in her hands, nor did she back up, but she didn't try to come any closer, either.

"Ah-ha!" said Yuri triumphantly as she found a long white ribbon in one of Monika's trench coat pockets. "Give me a second…there, now you look like yourself, President," said Yuri affectionately as she put Monika's hair up.

"I don't feel like me…gods, Yuri, I was a butcher…" said Monika faintly, holding both sides of the trashcan with white knuckles and still bent forward.

"I'm so sorry, Monika," said Yuri gently, "It sounds like an *awful* way to Wake Up. But it wasn't you, remember? Not the real you. You

would never do such barbaric things."

"Wouldn't I?" Monika countered, wiping her mouth on her sleeve and turning to face Yuri, "We both know why Yggdrasil dropped me in this…person's…shoes. It might not have been my hands holding the knife, or tying the noose, but I–"

SMACK!

"That's *quite* enough of that," said Yuri icily, rubbing her now-stinging palm. "You were insane, then. We've forgiven you. We don't need to get back into all that."

"Right…you're right, I'm sorry," Monika mumbled. She squeaked when Yuri pulled her into a tight hug. Yuno went rigid and stared at them in shock. Her knife hand tightened…

The next thing Yuno knew, Yuri was screaming out, half in pain and half in…ahem.

Yuno blinked, surprised. She had meant to stab Third in the back of the head, but her knife had wound up in Yuri's shoulder instead. *'Yuri…why would she…?'*

"What is wrong with you, you psycho?!" demanded Monika as she swung a fist at Yuno's face. Unfortunately, throwing punches was not a martial skill she had invested much into, and Yuno had very good reflexes. So Monika wound up kissing the ground.

"Wait!" gasped Yuri, "She's not…hyAHH!" she gasped as she dislodged the knife in her back, "She's convinced you're a threat… and I think she's obsessed with me, so, y'know…"

The sound of sirens cut through the air, and Yuri groaned. "Okay, this is just getting asinine. Yuno? Things are very complicated, and we *all* need to get the hell out of here before we can explain anything. But for now, *stop trying to hurt Monika* . She's my friend. She is *not* going to hurt either of us. Whatever you think is supposed to be going on, *it*

isn't. No stand down!" Yuri said sternly as she helped Monika up to her feet.

" *Yuri! Are you okay?!* " Yuno and Monika asked at the same time. Then they glared at each other…

"I'm fine!" Yuri snapped, "Now let's cut the Three Stooges act and get out of here before the law comes down on our heads! Monika, I know they're revolting but do your Loop Memories offer any expertise on–"

"Yes. Follow my lead," said Monika decisively, starting down the alleyway.

Yuri made a point of staying between Monika and Yuno, and kept an eye on the pink-haired girl at all times. She was back to looking all innocent and cheerful.

' *I'm starting to suspect…that this is not going to be an easy loop,'* Yuri thought with a sigh.

Part 2

The getaway had been clean, and the trio of ladies made their way, after a brief debate, to Yuri's house. She kept an eye on Yuno the whole time, but she had done another one-eighty; she seemed completely innocent, with not a shred of murderous intent. Yuri had no intention of lowering her guard, however. Monika had discarded her 'serial killer outfit' along the way. Underneath, she had been wearing a plain black tee-shirt and dark slacks.

"How's your shoulder, Yuri?" Monika asked as they entered the house, making no effort whatsoever to disguise the withering glares she kept shooting at Yuno.

"It's fine; barely noticeable as long as I don't move my arm too much," Yuri replied, which was more or less true. As soon as the front door was closed, she kicked off her shoes, stepped into her

house slippers, pulled her hoodie off, and started taking her shirt off. Yuno squeaked and looked away, blushing. Monika didn't react so strongly, but rather appeared torn between glaring at Yuno and eyeballing Yuri's injury. "Monika, I understand how you must feel, but I don't think your trying to burn a hole in Gasai-san's head is going to help."

"She stabbed you!" Monika reminded her unnecessarily.

"I wasn't aiming for her, though," said Yuno apologetically.

"I know…you were aiming for *me* ," Monika said icily.

"You *were* trying to hurt Yuri, y'know," said Yuno, returning her glare this time.

"Not at that moment!"

"I still don't trust you."

"Well neither do I!"

"GIRLS!" Yuri shouted, whirling around to face the bickering duo, hands on her hips. Shirtless.

Monika and Yuno turned to Yuri. Yuno blushed furiously and turned around. Monika only raised an eyebrow. "Now, see, the lace makes sense, but the *pink* comes as a bit of a surprise. That seems more like Natsuki or Sayori's thing," Monika remarked.

Yuri stared at her flatly. "Ha. Ha. Very funny," Yuri deadpanned. She dropped her bloodsoaked shirt on the floor. "Gasai-san, do make yourself comfortable in my living room, please. Monika, come help me with this in the bathroom, please."

"What?!" gasped Yuno, turning back around. "N-no! I'll help you, Yuri–"

"No," said Yuri firmly, "I don't mean any offense, Yuno, but if I were trying to dress my crush's wound–which I had caused, no less–I don't know if I could keep my hands steady. Monika, at least, I can trust to emotionally distance herself from…whatever it is she might apply herself to. Which, in the case of dressing injuries, is a good thing," Yuri added emphatically when she saw Monika start to look downcast. "So she's going to help me deal with *what you did* , and then we'll move forward from there. Help yourself to the fridge, if you're hungry." Yuri then proceeded to the bathroom.

Monika started following her while Yuno headed for the kitchen. But Monika heard Yuno whisper as she passed, "I *will* kill you, if you make one wrong move." Monika didn't give her the satisfaction of a reaction. She just rolled her eyes.

A moment later, Yuri sat at the edge of the bath while Monika cleaned and dressed the stab wound in her right shoulder. "So, the three of us have phones that tell the future," Monika surmised.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there are more," said Yuri, trying not to fidget or flinch.

"Did you get yours from an imp with white hair, by any chance?" asked Monika.

"You mean Muru Muru? Kind of…I got mine from her boss, actually. Deus X. Machina. I kid you not."

"I recall Muru Muru mentioning something about a survival game and other "future diary" owners. I forget how many…"

"There are twelve, altogether," spoke up a third voice. Monika flinched, and she and Yuri both turned left. There was the imp in question, a dark-skinned little girl with silver hair. She was sitting on a white ball, floating in midair, and slurping up some mochi. "There are twelve future diary owners involved in the Survival Game. You're the First, Amano Yuri; and you, Hiyama Monika, are the Third. Gasai Yuno is the Second," Muru Muru further clarified.

"Survival Game," Yuri said, narrowing her eyes. "Then we're supposed to be killing each other. What is the point of such a sick sport? Are you and Deus that bored?"

"Oh, no! It's not for sport," said Muru Muru, looking aghast. "See, Deus is…well, let's just say he needs to pick a successor soon. The winner of the Game will become the next God of Time and Space!"

"I see," said Yuri. At the same time, she and Monika pulled their diaries out of their pockets and tossed them on the floor in front of Muru Muru. " *We're not interested,* " they said together. Monika returned to stitching up Yuri's injury.

"What the–you can't just forfeit like that!" Muru Muru exclaimed.

"Neither Yuri nor myself have any interest in pursuing godhood," said Monika evenly, "In point of fact, a friend of ours strongly advised us against it. We'll simply stay out of the way for the rest of the loop, if you don't mind."

Muru Muru gasped. "Loop?! Wh-what loop?! Time hasn't *looped* , that's crazy-talk!"

Yuri stared at her. Monika, however, continued focusing on her work. "Are you aware of the Loops, Muru Muru?" Yuri asked.

"There's no loop, damn it!" Muru Muru snapped, "No one's gone back in time! Ever! It's impossible!"

Monika chuckled, "Speak for yourself. I've gone back in time millions of times. Yuri, tens of thousands at the very least. Moreover, neither of us are originally from this universe. Why do you think I'm helping her instead of trying to kill her now?"

"Oh, hey, I just had an idea," Yuri spoke up. She asked Muru Muru, "Are there any Diary Owners named Sayori or Natsuki?"

Muru Muru's mouth fell open. "I'll take that as a yes…could you pass a message along, from me to them? Please?"

"Ah…uh, I guess?" said the thoroughly bewildered imp.

"Ask them both of they're feeling Loopy. If their reply includes the word Awake or Anchor in it, give them this address and tell them there's a club meeting tonight. If they're Awake, they'll know what it means."

"You wanna give away your location to more Diary Owners?" asked Muru Muru. "Geez, if you wanna die so badly all you have to do is break your phones."

Monika froze. " *What?* " she and Yuri both asked.

"Oh, you don't know?" asked Muru Muru, "Guess you haven't lived through these events after all. Ha!"

"We never said we did, we–nevermind, what does breaking our phones have to do with dying?" Monika pressed.

"Your diaries don't just tell your futures, silly. They *are* your futures. Losing one means you lose the other. In other words…well, I wouldn't be tossing them around all wily-nily like you girls just did, if it were me," the imp replied with a smirk. Then she disappeared in a flash of light.

Monika quickly scooped her and Yuri's phones off of the floor, put hers in her pocket and gave the other back to Yuri, and returned to her stitching. It took a bit of effort to steady her hands this time.

"This Loop just gets better and better," Yuri sighed.

After another moment, Monika stood up. "There, you're all patched up…and it smells like Psycho did some cooking."

"Monika, please don't antagonize her," Yuri asked wearily, "She didn't mean to hurt me…and yes, I realize she *was* trying to hurt you,

but in her defense…you know…look, this is all going to be hard enough without our Pockets or our powers or anything as it is. We really don't need to be estranging potential allies while we're at it."

Monika sighed. "Okay…okay, alright, fine. You're right. I'll be nice. Just…ask her to knock it off with the death threats and creepy looks. She gives me the creeps. I don't know if you noticed or not, but she's *totally* a Yandere."

"Well, seeing as you're a *former* Yandere, that gives you two something to talk about, doesn't it?" asked Yuri with a smile.

Monika groaned. "Low blow, Yu. Low. Blow."

Yuri went to her room to get a new shirt, while Monika proceeded to the kitchen, where Yuno was busy fixing some kind of meal. "Alright, let's get one thing cleared up right now, Miss Gasai," said Monika as she made a beeline for the coffee maker. "I know none of what I'm going to say is going to make any sense, but it's all true. Yuri is one of my very best friends, and now that I'm 'Awake', I have absolutely no intention of hurting her. In fact, I have no intention of letting anyone or anything else cause her harm, either. And we just got a visit from that Murmur girl. I'm guessing you already knew about the Survival Game?"

"Yep," Yuno chirped, stirring a pot of soup.

"Then know this," said Monika in the most serious tone she could muster, "I will absolutely *not* allow Yuri or myself to die in this game, nor any of our other friends who might be involved in this twisted mess. And seeing as Yuri is willing to let bygones be bygones, I'll do my best to look out for you, too…just so long as *you* don't make things needlessly complicated for us. Am I understood, Gasai?"

"Sure," Yuno replied casually. Monika felt her eye twitch, getting a distinct sense that she was not being taken seriously. Monika opened her mouth to say more, but snapped it shut as Yuri entered the room.

"A turtleneck. Of course," said Monika with a giggle as she walked over to the fridge.

"I stocked up on tofu, in case you showed up," said Yuri, "It's in the bottom left crisper."

"You are an angel, Yuri. A beautiful, dark, gothic angel. But just for now, I think these will do," said Monika as she pulled up a bag of baby carrots and a bottle of ranch dressing.

"Eh? Hey, what gives?! Is my soup not good enough for you?" asked Yuno plaintively.

"Oh…I'm sorry," said Monika genuinely, "I just…your soup has beef in it, is all. I'm a vegetarian."

"Oh. Oh well, more for Yuri!" said Yuno brightly.

"…I am pretty hungry, come to think of it," Yuri admitted, her cheeks pinking a bit.

"There, everyone wins," said Monika happily as she sat down next to Yuri, pouring some ranch onto a saucer.

It wasn't long before the coffee was done. "No, no, go ahead and keep eating," said Yuri, jumping out of her seat and bounding over to the coffee machine before Monika had a chance to stand. Yuno watched out of the corner of her eye as Yuri poured a little milk and stirred a teaspoonful of sugar and, curiously enough, a pinch of ground cinnamon into the cup of coffee. She then delivered it to Monika and made an exaggerated bow. Monika snorted, Yuri giggled, and Monika chuckled a little as Yuri dropped back into her seat.

"Excellent as always, Yuyu~" Monika complimented after a deep draught of the revitalizing brew.

"My pleasure, Madam President," Yuri rejoined with a grin.

Then both girls *jumped* in their seats as Yuno slammed the pot of soup down on the table with a declaration of "Dinner's done!"

"Ah! Uh…thank you, Gasai-san," said Yuri. Monika, who had grabbed at her own chest in surprise, tried to play it off as reaching to itch her shoulder. She glared at Yuno, who only stared back with frigid eyes and an empty smile. *'Sweet merciful ash, it's going to be all night with these two, isn't it?'* Yuri thought exasperatedly.

"Oh, no need to be so formal, my love~" Yuno sang, turning her eyes to Yuri, her expression warming considerably, "Just call me Yuno…to hear my name from your lips would fill my heart with joy."

Monika gagged as Yuno briskly turned and bounced over to the cupboards to fetch a pair of bowls. She nudged Yuri with her elbow, and as soon as she had her friend's attention she made a rapid series of hand signs, 'speaking' to her in ASL. " *If you ever catch me gushing to someone like that, feel free to shoot me in my fool head.* "

" *I'm not crashing any loops just to accommodate your sense of indignation. You're just sour because she reminds you of us at our craziest; she's clearly desperate for acceptance and affection,* " Yuri signed back.

" *Why are you defending this psycho?!* " Monika signed, eyes widening and mouth tightening.

" *Why do we defend you to Loopers who didn't finish our game?* " Yuri retorted, narrowing her eyes. She continued before Monika could begin to respond, " *Everyone who's ever been in love has been some degree of crazy at some point. She's just lonely, can't you tell?* "

" *Yuri, you're one of my best friends and I love you so much, but you're really stretching the line for acceptance and tolerance here. If she were just weird I could deal, but she tried to kill me and could have killed you in the process! 'Lonely' doesn't justify homicidal mania. Trust me, I would know.* "

" *Exactly! You've been there before, why are YOU being so pigheaded about this?* "

" *Because I HAVE been there before! I know what she's capable of, and I don't like it. Seriously, why is she still here? And don't say "she made dinner" because you know what I mean.* "

" *Because here or somewhere else, she'll still be crazy. As long as she's here, I know what she's doing. If I know I've got a Yandere fixated on me, I prefer not to have to wonder what she's doing.* "

Monika groaned. " *Fine. That's actually a valid point…so, how are we going to explain to her that you're not really the person she's supposed to be crushing on? Because I'd rather not live with this Sword of Damocles over my head all loop.* "

" *Still working on that, Madam President,* " Yuri signed with a weary sigh.

"What the heck are you two *doing* ?" asked Yuno, who had been sitting across the table watching them for most of their exchange. Monika and Yuri both flinched and yelped.

"S-sign language!" Yuri half-yelled.

"Why so nervous, Yu?" asked Monika with a smug 'I'm right about her and you know it' expression.

"You two seem *awfully* familiar with each other all of a sudden," Yuno observed, Gendo-ing with her hands, "I hadn't realized Yuri and Hiyama-sensei were so close. That's kind of dodgy for a teacher and her student, isn't it? And if you really care for her so much, why did you come after her in the first place? Mine and Yuri's Diaries both predicted you were going to kill her."

Yuri just started in on her soup, subtly bowing out of the ensuing discussion. Monika sighed. "This isn't going to make any sense…but it's true, and Yuri will back me up on it. I'm not the person I was when

I got out of bed this morning. For that matter, I'm not the person who's been using this body for the last thirty years."

"What about the twenty before that?" Yuno slipped in. Then she laughed at the apoplectic look that stormed across Monika's face, "Kidding~"

" *As I was saying* …before you knocked me out in the alleyway, I was Hiyama Monika; high school teacher by day, and…serial killer… by night." Monika's face drained of color and she shivered. Without a word, without looking away from her food, Yuri reached out with a hand and gave Monika's shoulder a squeeze. Monika took a deep breath. "After you knocked me out, I…we call it 'Awakening', or 'Waking Up'. Essentially, I remembered who I really am, and my memories and true personality overwrote that of the being you knew as Hiyama Monika. Now, I'm–"

"Just Monika," Yuri piped up with a grin.

"Oh, stop it!" Monika giggle-snorted, swatting at Yuri, who ducked. "Geez…where was I? Oh, right. Well, Yuri and I? We're…we're called 'Loopers'. Yuri's in the same situation I am. Say, when did you even Wake Up, Yu?"

"About two weeks ago. The day before Deus gave me the Future Diary. My guess would be that's when this Loop started."

"Right. Before that point, she was Amano Yuri. I'm guessing your… feelings for her…started at some point in that nebulous past. But– and this is very important, so please pay attention– *she's not that person anymore* . Since she Awakened, 'Amano Yuri' was Replaced with 'Yuri of the Doki Doki Literature Club'. That's why we're so close, Gasai-san. We're from another universe altogether. In that universe, I'm not a teacher at all! I'm a third-year student and president of the Literature Club, which Yuri is a member of. Specifically, she's our Secretary of Aesthetics."

"Wait, what? Since when?" asked Yuri.

"Something I was thinking about last Loop. Kind of felt bad that Sayori and I have official positions and you and Natsuki are just club members," Monika answered as she traced the rim of her coffee mug with her finger. "We do love atmosphere, after all~"

"Oh, stop it, you," said Yuri with a blush.

"So, anyways. That's why. I'm *not* the person who set out to kill Yuri in this Survival Game to decide the next God of this world. That's why our futures changed; I Woke Up, and I am absolutely *not* going to let *anyone* or *anything* harm my precious club members. *Anyone* ," Monika restated firmly, staring hard into Yuno's eyes.

"I see…" said Yuno. Naturally, she didn't look like she believed a word of it. Monika didn't begrudge her at all, seeing as she couldn't do anything to prove her outrageous story.

"I'm very sorry, Ga…Yuno. Truly, I am so very sorry," spoke up Yuri, "But it's all true. Having no prior familiarity with your universe, I have no idea who I Replaced. Whoever they are, that's the person you are supposed to be in love with. I'm not that person. I don't belong in this world. I'm just a visitor. When this loop ends–whenever that may be–everything will reset. Monika and I will disappear, most likely returning to our own universe. The people we Replaced will take their places again, but you won't remember any of this. You're a non-Looper, so the next loop will be the only timeline you'll remember, just as this timeline is the only one you remember now."

Throughout this, Yuno started to look troubled. Especially at the mention of other timelines. Seeing that she was starting to get through to her in some way, Yuri pressed the offensive, as it were. "Please, understand that none of this is anyone's fault. Reality itself is damaged at a fundamental level, in ways that our mortal minds cannot even fathom. Something happened that broke the universe, so to speak, causing time to loop repeatedly, infinitely, in every universe there is."

"Yuri….no, no that's crazy, you can't…" Yuno looked shaken up now.

"Trust me, this isn't some ridiculously convoluted way of rejecting you, or something banal like that," Yuri added. You could never be sure how Yanderes might interpret these things, she knew very well. "I'm sure my Unawake self would have had no problem returning your feelings, if it's any consolation. Crazy doesn't bother me all that much, and I…well, I've always kind of had a thing for girls with pink hair," Yuri said with a blush, glancing aside.

*But as Yuri said this, the Universe proved that it's **always** listening.*

The sudden roar of an engine and bright light flooding in from the window were the only warning signs. Fortunately, it was just enough for Yuri, who grabbed Yuno by her arms and yanked her over the table, kicking back as she did so and sending them both flying back from the table. Monika leaped back as well, and Yuri wrapped both arms around Yuno and started rolling to the side as quickly as she could.

Then a van plowed in through the wall, demolishing everything in its path. The sink was destroyed and water started spraying everywhere. The van came to a stop just on top of where Yuno had been sitting. Still, its momentum was enough to send the table skidding across the floor and knock the pot of soup over. "HOLY CRAP!" Monika exclaimed, "YURI ARE YOU OKAY?!"

"I'm fine!" Yuri shouted back as she jumped up to her feet. Yuno did as well, and made a point of standing in front of Yuri.

"I'll give you just *one* warning, Gasai Yuno!" shouted a shrill voice from the van, "Get the *hell* away from my Yuri!"

' *Oh dear Admins above it's just everything tonight'* Yuri though bleakly, recognizing that voice.

The van's side-door slid open, and out jumped a petite young woman in a white dress, armed with a wooden baseball bat in one hand and a pump-action shotgun in the other. A short mop of bright pink hair crowned her head.

Natsuki had entered the scene, and both Yuri and Monika shivered at the apocalyptic expression on her face as she glared hellfire and supernovas at Yuno.

Part 3

"I'll give you *one* warning, Gasai Yuno," growled an absolutely murderous-looking Natsuki as she jumped out of the side of a van she had just rammed into Yuri's kitchen. With a baseball bat tucked under one arm, a pump-action shotgun in her hands, and wearing a white dress, Yuri's first impression of her was that of a jilted bride. Or, given her lack of a veil or bridal train, perhaps the vengeful bridesmaid of a jilted bride?

"Get the *hell* away from my Yuri!" Natsuki thundered, taking aim at Yuno (who just looked utterly perplexed) with the shotgun.

' ***My*** *Yuri? Oh dear, we might have to have a talk after this…oh, this could end really badly,'* Yuri thought worriedly as she glanced back and forth between Natsuki and Yuno.

Yuno frowned and glared back at Natsuki. "Hold on… *your* Yuri? Who the hell–" Yuno had to cut herself off as she jumped to the side, dodging the small orange blur that flew out of the end of Natsuki's shotgun when she fired it. Natsuki quickly pumped the firearm and tracked her quarry, firing another beanbag. Yuno dodged again.

"You have two choices!" Natsuki shouted over the roar of the gun as she continued to fire on her fellow pinkette. "Either you get out of here like a bat out of Hell, or Mama's gonna knock ya out!"

Despite Natsuki's best efforts, Yuno managed to dance around her barrage of non-lethal projectiles and get close enough to kick the shotgun out of her hands. And it was at that point that Yuri first noticed the switchblade knife in Yuno's hand. "Block at half past four, Nat!" Yuri shouted. Reacting on instinct, Natsuki used her bat to block Yuno's attempted underhand stab. Then Natsuki swung and Yuno jumped back. Roaring her little tsundere heart out, Natsuki

threw herself at Yuno, swinging like a pro slugger. The Babe would have been envious.

Yuno once again ran a strong dodging game until she saw an opening, and then darted back in for another stab. Unfortunately for her, Natsuki had Yuri on her side, and Yuri was even better with knives than she was. And when you were hundreds of thousands of years old and mostly only had the same three people to talk to, translating what they said into what they had been thinking in an instant, even in the heat of battle, was easy as breathing. "Horizontal one-twenty cee-em!" Yuri shouted. Natsuk held her bat horizontally at one-hundred-and-twenty centimeters high from the floor, and Yuno's knife wound up stuck in the wooden cudgel. Yuno's eyes widened, Natsuki grinned savagely, and proceeded to kick her opponent right in the…ahem…fork of her legs.

Yuri winced in sympathetic pain as Yuno's pupils shrank to dots and she tottered backwards. Before she could recover, Natsuki reared back with her bat and took a swing at her head. Yuri clamped her eyes shut. Then she opened them again when she heard *Natsuki* cry out in pain. Yuno had caught the bat with her hand, the knife was back in her hand, and Natsuki was quickly backpedaling and clutching her right arm. Blood was streaming from between her fingers. Upon noticing this detail, Yuri's brain stopped doing the brain things.

The next thing Yuri knew, Monika had her in a headlock and was screaming for her to calm down. Yuno was laid out on her back, bleeding from the mouth, staring at the ceiling and looking bewildered. Her face looked like a raccoon had attacked it. Natsuki's voice joined Monika's, but Yuri couldn't comprehend what they were saying. The only words in her head at the moment were 'rip' and 'tear'.

Yuno slowly sat up and looked at Yuri. Her mouth was moving, but Yuri's ears were still full of white noise. Yuri screamed something at her, but even her own words sounded foreign to her. Whatever she said, it was enough to make Yuno blanch and jump to her feet,

bolting out through the hole in the kitchen. Yuri continued to rage and thrash in Monika's grip for a moment, but with the object of her fury removed from her presence it didn't take long for her rational mind to reassert itself. Abruptly, she went limp in Monika's arms. Her breathing was laborious and ragged, all of a sudden. She felt like she had just gotten back from a thirty mile hike. Monika was breathing more heavily than she was, and a moment later the club president fell backwards.

"I was not prepared for today to be the kind of day it turned out to be," Monika groaned.

"Welcome to my world," Yuri heard Natsuki speak up from somewhere out of her sight, "Nothing but crazy bitches, all day every d–HELLO YURI!" Natsuki yelped as Yuri threw her arms around her, giving her a tight hug.

"I'm so sorry! It's all my fault, I shouldn't have let her hang around here. I should have listened to Monika! Are you okay, Natsuki?"

"Chill out, I'm fine! She only got a shallow cut on me. It wasn't even as bad as what she did to you, honestly," said Natsuki, awkwardly patting Yuri on her non-injured shoulder.

"Wait, how did you know about that?" asked Yuri.

Natsuki opened her mouth, but the sound of sirens approaching became audible. Natsuki's eyes widened. "Crap! I gotta scram…I'll meet you two outside of school tomorrow! Don't mention me to the cops!" said Natsuki as she jumped back into the van, and proceeded to back out of Yuri's house.

"What?" asked a bemused Yuri.

"I should make myself scarce as well," said Monika, "I am your teacher, after all. My presence at this hour would come across as 'dodgy', as Gasai put it. See you at school tomorrow, Yuri."

"Wait!" Yuri called, but Monika had already taken flight the same way Yuno and Natsuki had gone.

…

The next day, Yuri found a small box sitting on her desk, with a rich purple ribbon tied in a bow. There was no card attached to it, but Yuri was pretty sure she knew who it was from. She looked around; there was no sign of Yuno. *'She's always early,'* Yuri recalled, *'Part of her Model Student shtick.'*

Yuri took her seat and propped her chin in her hand, staring at the box. She had been able to deal with the cops last night without much difficulty. She did so by offering the simplest explanation; someone had randomly crashed into her house, and then promptly backed back out and taken off, and the cops had scratched their heads and chalked it up to a crazy drunk driving mishap. Her mother had been contacted, and she was coming home that afternoon. Yuri sighed, and rested her forehead on the desk. *'Well, this loop certainly isn't a bore. In fact, a game of wits against a bunch of other people with precognitive abilities sounds fun. The only question is how to deal with that girl…'*

After calming down and thinking it over, Yuri realized that she couldn't really fault Yuno for defending herself when Natsuki had attacked her out of nowhere without offering any kind of explanation. In fact, it occurred to Yuri that it was highly unusual for Natsuki to take such drastic action like that. Yuri could only guess that Natsuki knew things about this loop that she didn't. Maybe she had looped in here before, or was familiar with its Hub back-up? Things to ask her after school, Yuri concluded. She lifted her head and considered the box on her desk again. Sighing again, she untied the ribbon and opened the gift.

Sitting inside were a plush raven, a live lily, and a note. The noted included a chibi-doodle of Yuno herself, holding a card with the words 'I'm sorry, Yuri' inside it. Yuri facedesked. *'I can't forgive her for hurting Natsuki. I can't hate her for acting in self-defense, either.*

She's not a Club Member, or even a Looper, but she's still a person. A completely insane person. But I've forgiven Monika for worse – damn it, this is why I'm an introvert. People make an even bigger mess than usual out of my feelings. I miss Sayori. She'd know how to handle this.'

Yuri closed the box and dropped it into her bag, pulled out a book and tried to lose herself in its pages until class began.

…

"What's your number, by the way?" Yuri asked Monika as she caught up to her on the way out of the school.

"Oh…that's a good point, we should have traded numbers last night," said Monika. She gave Yuri her digits, and Yuri gave Monika hers.

"Hey…I was curious…when I was in full Rage Mode last night, I screamed something at Yuno…but I couldn't really understand myself at the moment…"

"You threatened to rip her throat out. With your teeth," Monika said bluntly, not looking at her.

"Oh," said Yuri, not sure whether to feel embarrassed or nauseous. "So…uh…any idea where Natsuki will be waiting for us?" she asked. Then she stopped in her tracks. "Never mind. Pretty sure she's over there," she said, pointing at a van in the school parking lot. It looked just like the van from last night, except it was hot-pink and had a bunch of cute baby animals painted on the sides.

"Ah, Natsuki. Truly, a master of subtlety," Monika noted as the approached the van.

"Hey, it's the *last* thing anyone would suspect an internationally-wanted terrorist from riding around in. So nyah!" piped up Natsuki, who poked her head out of the driver-side window. She was still

wearing the dress from last night, and she had a bandage tied around her right arm.

"A *what* ?!" exclaimed Yuri.

"Internationally-wanted terrorist. Of the 'Mad Bomber' variety, to be specific," reiterated Natsuki. "Now jump in, we're going for a ride."

Yuri and Monika did so, the former sitting in the back while the latter took shotgun. "Uh…sorry about that one night, by the way," said Monika bashfully.

"Oh, so you remembered," said Natsuki as she started the van and pulled out of the lot, "Well, I didn't collapse a building on top of you, so consider yourself forgiven."

"Hold on, what?" asked Yuri.

"I went after Natsuki…the Unawake me, that is," Monika explained, "We kind of did a cat and mouse thing in an abandoned art school."

"I got a cute dress out of the deal, so it wasn't a total wash, I suppose," said Natsuki impassively.

"And you also met a cute policeman~" Monika sang at her.

"NOTHING HAPPENED!" Natsuki yelled at her. Monika just snickered.

"Alright, Nat. You're clearly familiar with this Branch, so what's up?" asked Yuri.

Natsuki sighed. "Okay. The Back-Up for this Branch is a manga called "Mirai Nikki". As the name suggests– and as I'm sure you've already realized–it revolves around the thirteen Owners of Future Diaries, all locked in a Survival Game to select–by process of elimination, in the most literal sense of the word–the next God of this world."

"Thirteen?" Yuri questioned, "Muru Muru said there were twelve Diary Owners."

"Yeah, spoiler alert: the Seventh is two people," replied Natsuki, "They share a pair of linked phones; the 'Exchange Diary', which basically tells one what happens to the other."

"So what you're saying is that everyone's Diary tells the future, but the specifics work differently from Owner to Owner?" Yuri surmised.

"Correct. It's kind of like a Personality Power; the Diary functions in a manner based on how the Owner used their actual diaries. For example, the serial killer Monika replaced–which I find freaking hilarious, by the way–used his diary as a record of his murders. Thus, his Future Diary gave him foreknowledge of how he would corner and kill his victims. So he could track you and sidestep your defenses without issue, but with a weakness that it gave him no warning of how said victims would react once cornered. So in Baseline, he's the first to die. I'm Replacing Uryu Minene, the Ninth; she has the 'Escape Diary', which helps her plan out means of avoiding capture and other traps. Interestingly enough, when I Woke Up, my Diary started working differently. Now it warns me when you guys are in danger. I've decided to call it 'The Protector Diary'. That's how I knew Crazy Bitch stabbed ya."

"My Diary doesn't work at all anymore," commented Monika. "Which makes sense, I suppose, seeing as I have no intention of killing anyone."

"Weird," said Natsuki, frowning, "Why wouldn't yours change when you Woke Up and your personality asserted itself?"

Monika shrugged. "How does yours work, Yuri?" she asked.

"Well…it's kind of an extension of how I was using my diary before I Woke Up. It's just random notes about things that I'll see in the future. Besides the one time it predicted Monika killing me, it hasn't told me anything about things happening *to* me, just *around* me."

"Huh. The guy you're replacing, Yukiteru; his 'Indiscriminate Diary' works exactly the same way," said Natsuki. "Must be because you're both introverted."

"And how does Yuno's diary work?" asked Yuri.

Natsuki snorted and glared through the windshield. "Her 'Yukiteru'–actually, in this loop, I suppose it would be her 'Yuri Diary', tells her everything you do and everything that happens to you, every ten minutes. You, Yuri, specifically and exclusively. So it's basically the killer app for stalkers."

Yuri's eyes widened and Monika looked horrified. "Eeyup," Natsuki summarized.

"Ooookay…well, seguing awkwardly into the next thing I wanted to ask about," said Yuri, "Care to explain why you decided to go off like a psychopath on her last night?"

Natsuki slammed on the brakes. Yuri almost fell over between Natsuki and Monika's seats, but managed to catch herself. She suddenly found Natsuki's face inches from her own. "Gasai Yuno is the psychopath. She is obsessed with you, and she'll do anything to have you all to herself. She'll drug you, lock you away from the rest of the world, and kill anyone who tries to come between the two of you without blinking an eye. In the Hub, she's known as the *Queen* of Yandere. You can't trust her." Natsuki turned back and continued driving. "And despite all that, at least I came looking to subdue her. I'm not some freak that kills people on a whim, or because they're in my way." A moment after that, she blushed and winced, "Uh…"

"No, no, it's fine," said Monika, "You're not wrong."

"Okay. So…what's our plan?" Yuri asked.

"Well, we have three options," said Natsuki, "We can play the Game, which means killing nine or ten other people–depending on whether or not Sayori is here–and then you and me and possibly Sayori

offing ourselves so Monika can win, since the Loop will crash anyways if she dies. Or we wait until the loop ends. Which, if no one wins the Game, means Deus dies and the world pretty much comes to an end. Or, numero-tres, we just crash the loop right now and get it over with."

Yuri and Monika stared at her. Natsuki shrugged. "I said we had three options. I didn't say any of them were pleasant."

"Well Option 1 is straight out," said Monika, "Even if all the other Diary Owners are unrepentant monsters as the Third was, I'm certainly not letting you girls die for me. We've done that song and dance before, thank you very not."

"Well, the ball's in your court, Prez. You can pull a Sayori and skip us along to the next loop, or we can wait for the apocalypse while dodging a squad of prescient killers," said Natsuki glumly.

"And we have no other options at all?" asked Yuri. "Deus is a God of time and space. He might be Loop-Aware. Maybe we can explain to him that reality is already kind of tied up with Monika and convince him to declare her the winner by default?"

Natsuki looked thoughtful. "Well, couldn't hurt to try. Even if he isn't Loop-Aware, I might be able to convince him of the Loops, seeing as I know things I have no business knowing even with my Diary."

Just then, three bursts of static blared out at once. Natsuki pulled out her phone and handed it to Monika, who was checking her own as well. Yuri consulted her own. Her blood froze.

[0:00 May 2 nd .]

Loop Crash; someone must have gotten Monika!

-DEAD END-

"Fuck," Monika moaned, "I have a dead end."

"How?" asked Natsuki.

Monika looked between her phone and Natsuki's. "Shot in the head by 'Fourth'. Who's Fourth?"

"He's a cop with a dying son," answered Natsuki with a frown, "One of the *less* crazy Owners, he wouldn't want to win the Game at all if it weren't the only way he could save his kid. Besides that, he's a good cop who's Diary works kind of similar to…Third's. It's an 'Investigation Diary' that tells him about future cases…oh, I think I know what's going on here. Monika, give Yuri your phone. There's some rope back there, tie her up good and tight."

" *What?!* " asked Yuri and Monika.

"The nature of Fourth's Diary makes it very easy for him to identify Owners with more overtly criminal dealings. Like serial killers and terrorists, for example. Since our phones predict him killing you, we have to assume that he already has you pegged as an Owner. It's the only reason he would take the risk of executing you instead of arresting you, like he's supposed to. Especially since I'm guessing you have no intention of resisting arrest, am I right?"

"Okay, that's a fair point. But why tie up Yuri?" asked Monika as she was climbing into the back.

"Because as of this moment, you and I are in a villainous alliance and Yuri's our hostage. Fourth will track us down and rescue her, and then she can ally with him for a while." They stopped at a red light, and Natsuki glanced back at Yuri, "He'll betray you eventually, but not right away. If nothing else, it'll keep you out of his crosshairs for a little while longer. The tricky part will be us getting away, but between my Diary and Monika's brain, we'll figure something out."

"I'm curious, though; why are you guys taking me hostage instead of killing me?" asked Yuri.

"Who knows? We're crazy," replied Natsuki, "Bad guys do dumb crap like this all the time."

"Well, suppose I somehow found out about how Yuno's Diary worked, and suggested keeping Yuri alive to lure her out?" said Monika.

"Sure, why not?" said Natsuki.

"Um, Monika?" Yuri spoke up, "Do you think you could…eh, n-nevermind…"

Monika raised an eyebrow. She sighed, and tightened the rope around Yuri's wrists and chest.

"Th-thank you…" said Yuri, blushing.

"Don't mention it. *Please* ."

The light turned green, but they didn't make it very far before they heard sirens. "Okay, girls. You trust me, right?" Natsuki asked.

Monika snorted, "What kind of question even *is* that, Nats? If *anyone* in the club comes anywhere close to being unconditionally dependable, it's you."

"I concur," said Yuri, nodding sagely.

Natsuki blushed. "Y'all could've just said 'yes'…alright, hold on tight if you can, pray to Ganesh if ya can't!" Natsuki shouted before flooring the accelerator.

Static blared, Monika quickly glanced at Natsuki's Diary, and she suddenly grabbed the wheel and twisted it hard to the right. The van twisted ninety degrees, and something struck them hard in the rear end. Yuri slammed into the back of Natsuki's seat. The van was pushed into the other lane and struck by another car. Yuri was thrown into the side of the van, bouncing off and hitting the other side head first.

She lost consciousness.

Part 4

"Craaaaaaaaap," Natsuki moaned, "Monika, are you okay?" Blood was running freely from the club president's forehead, but Natsuki knew that head wounds like that always looked a lot worse than they actually were; at least, as long as there weren't any dents or protruding objects. *'Friggin' janky airbags,'* Natsuki thought.

"No…Nat, my leg is caught…" Monika sounded like she was in more pain than she wanted to let on, and she was holding her right side gingerly.

"The hell do you mean, 'caught'?" Natsuki demanded as she unbuckled herself and reached over for the glovebox. From it she produced a collapsed telescopic baton.

"It's pinned," Monika hissed, trying not to whimper, "And I think Yuri's knocked out. Grab her and run for it."

"What?! But you've got the dead –"

"Yes! Because I won't be able to get away. *Now grab Yuri and get the hell out of here!* "

"Monika…" Natsuki said pleadingly, looking to her friend softly. She hated to admit it, but she cared for Monika as much as the others. *'Not my fault my heart's too soft to hold a grudge, even though she deserves it,'* Natsuki thought.

"We both know that if you had to choose, you'd choose her anyways, so quit being stubborn! I'm not in danger until midnight, anyways."

"…we *will* save you," Natsuki growled. She grabbed a satchel from under her seat and scrambled to the back. She could hear people moving around outside. No doubt they were cops, ready to open up the van and bag them all. Her eyes widened. "Monika, my Diary!"

she hissed. Monika tossed it weakly, but Natsuki lunged and caught it. A quick check confirmed her suspicions. *'They're going to open the back door and tear-gas us. Friggin' A, Fourth.'*

Knowing she had less than a minute, Natsuki moved quickly. She put her satchel over her shoulders and put the baton in it, in turn withdrawing two smokebombs and a flashbang. Next, she dropped her Diary into her bra and opened up a hatch in the van's floor. Underneath was a shallow compartment containing a compact dirtbike, she hauled out. Then she grabbed the baseball bat that had been rolling around the back. With it, she smashed one of the back door windows, tossed the flashbang out, then closed her eyes, clapped her hands tightly over her ears, and turtled. After she heard the *THUMP* , she tossed the smokebombs.

Natsuki tried opening the doors, but they were jammed by the crash. Natsuki growled, her frustration mounting even as she felt the seconds ticking down in her head; they were already out of time, and the police were going to overcome her minor obfuscation any second. Calling upon the mental discipline of subjective *millennia* of martial training, Natsuki overrode her mind's inhibitors and (with the added boost of being utterly pissed at the situation) she kicked the back doors with as much strength as the human body could generate. The doors obligingly flew open, and Natsuki tamped down hard on the flare of pain that shot through her foot, ankle, and leg all the way up to her knee. She mounted the bike and, with some difficulty, hauled Yuri up into her lap. *'Damn me, tying her up was a freaking stupid idea. And even if I had a knife on me I don't even have time to cut them!'*

She kickstarted the bike, revving it with the same hand that had a white-knuckle grip on her bat. Then, with a roar that Minene would have approved of, Natsuki rode out into the fray, riding blindly through the smoke.

Immediately, even before she was clear of the smoke, gunshots rang out all around her. Natsuki's brain *screamed* as she felt white-hot fire graze across the back of her neck. Another stray shot slammed into

her left thigh, but Natsuki supplanted the agony with fury. *'Go right a-frakking-head! Fill me with lead for all I care, but none of you bastards are stopping me! Yuri and I are blowing this scene and nothing's gonna stop us!'*

One particularly ballsy officer–Natsuki vaguely recalled him as the man who had helped Unawake-her against Unawake-Monika–appeared in front of her with a service revolver in hand. He made the mistake of hesitating, which Natsuki didn't reciprocate. She leaned a little to the side and swung out with the bat, smacking him in the head and sending him sprawling as she sped past him. She heard a scream of pain in the distance, which she tried to pretend she didn't easily recognize as Monika's voice. *'God damn it…I'm sorry, we'll come back, I swear!'* Natsuki thought frantically, before shaking her head and clearing her thoughts. For now, she knew, she couldn't think of anything but getting as far as she could from the cops.

She didn't hear the static from her Diary over the roar of the bike, and as she rounded a corner her eyes flew wide. Acting on instinct, she threw herself to the side, off of the bike to avoid the fireman's axe that would have slammed into her chest. She and Yuri both tumbled down onto the road as the bike kept flying along before crashing down and skidding. Natsuki paid the bike no mind, her furious eyes fixed squarely on the other pink-haired girl, the one responsible for their crash. "Fuckin' Gasaiiiiii," she seethed.

Yuno only smiled vacantly back at her. "You've got your grubby paws all over my angel," she said, "That…doesn't sit well with me. Not gonna lie."

"…yeah, you're *way* easier to hate than Monika," said Natsuki, standing up and telling her legs to stuff a sock in it.

Yuno wasn't fooled, however. "C'mon, sweetie, you can barely stand. Just back away from Yuri and I'll let the cops have you…for now. We both know there can't be a future where you *and* Yuri survive."

"Balls to that!" Natsuki screamed, pulling out her baton and snapping it out to its full length, "Even if we have to put a gun to God's head and make him rewrite the rules of the Game, we're not going to let anyone die! I don't even want *your* death on my conscience, even though you make me sick to my stomach."

Yuno tilted her head. "You really have the nerve to say something like that, after all the people you've blown to bits? After all the people Third has cut to ribbons?"

Natsuki choked down bile at the reminder of 'Uryu Natsuki's actions. "That wasn't us. Not the real us. Not the us that are friends with Yuri. And she's not the same Yuri you're obsessed with, either! She's *our* Yuri, and we'll protect each other no matter what!" Natsuki screamed as she ran at Yuno. Her left thigh and her right shin both screamed in protest, but Natsuki fought through the pain. Absolutely nothing in the world was as personally important to her, at this very moment, than beating this pretentious psychopath to a pulp. If she had to be perfectly honest, in her state of outrage even Yuri's safety was momentarily eclipsed by the need to teach this bitch a thing or two.

With baton in one hand and bat in the other, two legs burning with agony and what Natsuki hoped was sweat but suspected was blood beginning to soak the back of her dress, she threw herself into the melee with the rage of a thousand tsundere.

Unfortunately for her, Yuno was almost as determined, if more subtly so, and had none of her handicaps. She danced out of Natsuki's reach and around to her side, snapping out a kick into her injured thigh. Natsuki's battle cry became a piercing scream of pain, but she didn't collapse. She did, however, come to a halt and had to raise her bat to block Yuno's axe. She deflected the swing away from her, at least, but Yuno cut her bat in half in the process. *'Oh. Right, she's freakishly strong for a high school girl,'* Natsuki recalled. The cut had been at a forty-ish degree angle, so what had been a forty-inch bat was now, essentially, a two-foot wooden stake.

She backed up as quickly as she could manage, and gave a resigned sigh. *'Damn…I can't let my emotions get the best of me. Focus, Natsuki!'* Natsuki held her ground, letting Yuno come to her, which she did. Natsuki used her pain to fuel her anger, and her anger to focus her mind. She blocked out Yuno altogether, focusing solely on her axe. Time, it seemed to Natsuki, slowed just a little as she let the axe draw closer to her neck. Yuno's eyes widened as she realized something wasn't right, as Natsuki grinned. Moving so fast it was a blur, Natsuki's baton intercepted the axe just under the head, wedging against the handle. Even as she levered the weapon out of Yuno's hand, she thrust her 'stake' into Yuno's stomach. *'Your Diary has the same weakness as Yuri's,'* Natsuki thought, *'It doesn't tell you shit that happens to you unless it's fatal.'*

As Natsuki had anticipated, Yuno managed to catch the stake with her hand at the last second. Natsuki snarled and slammed her forehead into Yuno's, sending her reeling back. Then she smacked her in the head with her baton and kicked her back. Natsuki started feeling lightheaded, and began to wonder how much blood she had already lost. She glanced down at the leg she had been shot in, and gagged at the sight of the blood running down it. She threw herself at Yuno, intending to beat her about the head until she was firmly knocked the hell out.

Then three more bullets slammed into her back, and she threw up blood as she staggered and fell forward. *'No…no…no, no, nononono DAMN IT!'* she thought futilely as consciousness started bleeding away from her. *'Why didn't…my Diary…warn me?'* she thought before sinking into the abyss.

…

Yuri was moving when she regained consciousness. Specifically, it felt like she was being carried. "Gllrbrmleph…" she gurgled incoherently as her brain sluggishly reasserted control over her body. Which, she belatedly realized, was still bound tightly enough to…well let's just say Yuri was more than one kind of frustrated and leave it at that. Also, for some reason, she was blindfolded.

"Mmmmmmonika? Natsuki? …Sayori?" she asked, "Who's carrying me?"

"Don't worry about them, beloved," replied a voice that sent a chill down Yuri's spine, "Your guardian angel has you well in hand."

"What did you do to my friends?" Yuri hissed venomously.

"You mean those degenerates that tied you up and were going to do God knows what with you?" Yuno asked, "I left them to Fourth and Sixth's tender mercies. You won't have to worry about them anymore, I'm sure."

' *Fourth?!'* Yuri thought in a panic. "What time is it?!" she demanded, struggling, or rather *trying* to struggle against her bonds. She was too firmly bound.

"Eh? It's about nine-thirty, hon. Why?"

' *Okay. Two and a half hours. Hopefully, plenty of time…wait, Natsuki specifically said her Diary warned her about* us *being in danger, didn't she? No, wait, even my Diary gave me a Dead End flag, and otherwise it doesn't tell me anything about myself. And if Natsuki had gotten a Dead End Monika would have focused on that over her own, and she was reading from Natsuki's Diary…but I've been out for* hours *, and until I put myself on a path that eventually crosses hers my Diary won't tell me if she's alive, dead, or going to die or not.'* Yuri's mind was whirling, but she tried to clamp down on all the what-ifs and other hypotheticals. Her ponderings were useless as long as she was indisposed like this.

"Yuno. I'm telling you, those girls are my friends and we all care very much for each other. If they get hurt, I'll be *miserable* . If you really care about me, you *have* to help me save them! Or at least let me go so I can do something!"

"Yuri, love, you're being irrational. I don't know what they put in your head, but those girls are our enemies. Everyone in this Game is out

for themselves. Except for me, of course. All I care about is keeping you safe and helping you win. And you can't win if they live."

Yuri's first thought was to lash out and rage against her, but she smothered that impulse. It wasn't going to get her anywhere. She had no recourse but to try reasoning with a psychopath. "Yuno, if what you're saying is true…the only logical conclusion is that *you* are going to have to die, too, in the end."

"I know," Yuno said blithely. "But that's okay. I'm nothing without you, my love."

"Oh my *gods* , that is sick, Yuno!" Yuri exclaimed, "How can you so callously disregard your own life like that? How can you expect *anyone* worth loving to love someone like that? Anyone who would *allow* another person to…to think and behave in such a manner, in the name of *love* ?! A person like that wouldn't be worthy of your love, Yuno. And if I were in love, I would cut down God Himself before I would let myself be put into a position where I can only live at the expense of my lover."

"I know," Yuno acknowledged. "And that's what I love about you, Yuri. You're the only person I've ever know who really, truly cares about other people. You might even be the closest thing to a truly selfless person in the whole world. That's why, if anyone is going to inherit the Throne of Deus, it should be you. And I'm happy to die for that to happen."

Something in Yuri's head snapped. She was pretty sure it was her patience. "Fuck that!" she snarled, "That's not how love works! That's not how *selflessness* works! And I'm not selfless, either! I want my friends to be happy and safe, sure, but damn it I want to be happy too! I wouldn't ever just throw my life away for someone else like that. If I die for my friends, it'll be fighting alongside them, not sacrificing myself for their benefit. That's…that's so sick and twisted and…and…and fuck you, Gasai! If that's your idea of love then you aren't fit to speak of the subject. Lovers take from each other as much as they give. Love is knowing that someone is using you, but

you know you're using them too. You're both using each other so you don't have to be alone. We dress it up with pretty words but at its bones that's love. Two lonely people taking refuge in each other…it isn't love if you're willing to subject your lover to loneliness; at the most extreme, it's better to die together than to abandon someone that way. I would *never* let Natsuki die for me like that! I'd be pissed off at her if she even tried!" A beat, and then Yuri hastily added, "A-and the same goes for Monika and Sayori, too!"

Yuri belatedly realized they had stopped moving. Yuno had staggered to a halt at the words 'die together'. Yuri, who was pretty sure Yuno was carrying her over her shoulder, thought she could feel the other girls breathing and heart rate hitch up. And then she became *eerily* still. Yuri had that odd feeling again, as if Yuno had been replaced with another, colder person.

"You're right," said Yuno, and she was using that hollow tone of voice again. "This was never going to end with me dying for you…it was going to end like it did last time. With *you* dead, and me moving on to the next Yuri." Another moment passed in tense silence, and when Yuno spoke again she was startlingly choked with emotion, "Damn it Yuri, why do you have to be so clever? I thought I could fool you, make things play out like they did before, but you…damn it!" Yuri suddenly found herself at the mercy of that harsh mistress, gravity; she fell and hit the ground, her injured shoulder screaming as it hit what felt like concrete.

Yuri felt the hairs on her neck stand up, and she suddenly knew in her gut that Yuno was now an active threat to her. She quickly rolled away as she heard something strike and split the concrete with a sharp crack. She struggling up to her feet and wildly shook her head back and forth until she managed to dislodge her blindfold. At the sight of Yuno rushing her with what appeared to be a fireman's axe, Yuri blanched and dropped on her ass. The axe whistled above her head, taking a good three inches of her purple mane with it.

Now, see, Yuri was a modest woman, but she took pride in her hair. Not Yang Xiao Long-tier, but still. "Oh…YOU BITCH!" Yuri screamed,

her eyes flashing with hellfire and her face contorting into an enraged snarl of ***DOOM*** . Before Yuno could prepare a second attack, Yuri got her legs under her and lunged forward, head-butting Yuno in the stomach so hard she dropped her axe and staggered backwards, her feet slipping as she fell on her back.

Yuri started towards her, but stumbled as lightheadedness suddenly came over her and she fell back down, her head swimming. *'Rope around my chest…too tight…can't breathe fully…'*

Yuno was the first to get back up. She fetched her axe, and soon loomed over Yuri like a pink-haired Grim Reaper. "I'm so sorry about this, Yuri. But this is how it has to be. I can't live without you…"

"So you're going to kill me. *Naturally* ," said Yuri dryly.

"You'll die, yes," said Yuno with a sad smile, "But when I win the game and become God again, I'll go back and do it all over with another Yuri. And this time I'll be more careful."

That gave Yuri pause. Her brain started whirling again, but then she realized that this really was *not* the time.

Yuno brought her axe down on Yuri again, but this time she twisted at the last second so the axe sliced through her ropes. It also tore a (thankfully shallow) gash in her skin.

Yuri rolled herself into a crouch and tried to knock Yuno down with a leg sweep, but Yuno jumped backwards. Yuri jumped back as well, making a decent gap between them, and as she stood up the rope fell away from her chest.

' *There, much better. Still can't use my hands, but at least I can breathe now. Baby steps, Yuri.'*

Yuno charged at Yuri again, axe at the ready, but she hadn't taken three steps before something whistled through the air and cut through the haft just under the head. The axe-blade fell harmlessly to

the ground. Yuno tottered to a halt and stared at the decapitated handle in her hand, confused.

"That's quite enough of this, thank you," said a soft, female voice. Yuri felt that it sounded very familiar, but…could it be? She turned her eye to the right, into the shadow, from which a figure in dark robes stepped into view. Yuno gasped and jumped back. The figure lowered her hood, and Yuri gasped as well. "Hello, Yuri," Sayori greeted her, her voice much lower than usual, almost somber, "I would say it's nice to see you, but…ah-ha, that wouldn't be entirely accurate." She waved one of her hands in front of her dull, glazed, unfocused eyes.

' *She's blind?!'*

Yuno slowly took a step forward; Sayori's head snapped back her way and her hand flew up. Yuno yelped and staggered backwards, falling down and clutching her leg, which now had a long, thin red line running down it. Sayori lowered her hand, snapping the whip in her hand against the ground. "Stay there a moment, Yuno. I'll deal with you in a moment. Yuri, over here please."

"You…you're Awake, right, Sayori?" Yuri asked as she approached.

Sayori sighed, "This loop is making you paranoid, Yuyu. I'm Awake, Loopy, seeking an Anchor, all that good noise. The less I move around, the better I can focus my hearing, that's all. Here," as soon as Yuri was close enough Sayori handed her something. It was a cell phone.

"It's not my Diary," said Sayori, "But it has directions to the compound where Monika is being held. Natsuki got away, but I have no clue where she is. Sitting across the street is a suitcase. You'll find what you need inside. Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth are all there. Fourth is the cop, Fifth is a little redheaded kid, and Sixth is the cult leader. Fourth's Diary doesn't have a whole lot of combat application, and Fifth has already used two of his Diary's three predictions for today, but don't underestimate either of them. Fourth is a very good

shot and has the entire police department at his disposal, and Fifth is…well, he's the Yuno Gasai of five-year-olds, for lack of a better on-hand comparison. Sixth is the real threat; she's not adept at anything physical and her eyes are almost as useless as mine, but good enough for reading her Diary, which is like yours…except it tells her everything that her cultists see. So be very stealthy. And watch out for Murmur; she's the one who teamed up three Diary Owners against you girls. She's working for Yuno, and she thinks you might have figured out the big secret."

"What secret?" Yuri asked, "Sayori, how do you–"

"SHUT UP!" screamed Yuno, running at them. Sayori flicked her wrist and gave a sharp tug to the side; her whip caught Yuno's ankle and yanked her foot out from under her, sending her prone again.

"I said I would deal with you soon, Yuno," Sayori repeated patiently. She turned back to Yuri, "I'll explain things later. For now, you only have a little more than two hours to save Monika, and it's going to take almost that long to get there unless you steal a car."

"Sayori, come with me," Yuri pleaded, "Don't bother with her, she's hopeless. Monika needs us ."

"Everybody needs somebody, buddy," Sayori said with a smile, "Now get going. Two sad, broken little girls need to have a heart-to-heart."

"Sayori…okay. I'll trust your judgment," said Yuri reluctantly. She turned on the cell phone Sayori had given her, found the directions, and started off running down the street.

"Oh, and Yuri? *Don't hold back* ," Sayori called after her.

…

About an hour ago:

Natsuki's eyes opened slowly. Her whole body ached, covered with bruises and worse. She was in a dark room, not pitch black but rather dimly lit. "Hairline fracture in the left tibia, snapped left fibula, sprained left ankle, severely bruised left foot, all self-inflicted; bullet extracted from right thigh, femur grazed but otherwise unbroken; bleeding abrasion across the back of the neck, caused by a bullet; multiple abrasions all over the body, some bleeding but not substantially, caused by tumbling from a speeding vehicle; and finally, three gunshot injuries in the back, two bullets extracted from the back and one bullet still lodged in the right scapula," spoke an even tone. A young man or a teenager. "In short, you've been beaten pretty badly. Your survival is impressive, no doubt."

Natsuki groaned. "Yeah, that all sounds about right…who're you? You a Diary Owner?"

"I do keep a journal, of course, but judging by the way you put emphasis on those words I suspect that I'm not…whatever it is that you're thinking of. Sorry. The name's Akise Aru."

"Oh thank goodness," Natsuki sighed, smiling involuntarily. "The *not* insane one."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Never mind. Where's Yuri…ah, crap, Gasai must have her."

"The other girl? Yes, she spirited away with your hostage after butchering three policemen with an axe," said Akise. He tried to keep his tone controlled, but Natsuki could hear the disgust in his tone.

"She wasn't a hostage. We tied her up so the cops would *think* she was a hostage, but then things went way south way fast. Yuri's my… my best friend. And Gasai is her insane stalker. *And now she has Yuri* ."

"Well, that's unfor– *what are you doing* ?" Akise asked, audibly shocked as Natsuki sat up. Her body protested loudly. Natsuki told

her body to get over itself and get with the program. Looking around, she guessed that they were in Akise's room. Or a room in his house, anyways. Knowing as she did *what* he was, she figured he lived alone. Leaning against the wall, next to the door, was Akise himself. A white-haired teen with calculating red eyes and a dispassionate expression.

"Where's my Diary?" she demanded, patting her chest. Her chest had been bandaged. Also, her dress was gone. Her right thigh was also bandaged and her left shin had a splint bound to it.

"…the phone you had in your bra?" Akise hazarded.

"…yeah," Natsuki affirmed with a faint blush.

"On the stand, next to you."

"Thanks. Did you cauterize or suture the gunshot wounds?" Natsuki asked.

"No…I dressed them," said Aru.

"No good," Natsuki grunted, "I need the bleeding *stopped* , not just contained. I can't *fight* with that kind of injury, especially with how tightly my chest is bound."

"Cauterization is an extreme, last resort solution and suturing isn't recommended until the wound has had time to partially heal," Aru said evenly, "There's risk of infection–"

"Infection is too long-term an issue for me to care," said Natsuki bluntly as she read her Diary. "If I don't act soon, the world ends at midnight. In less than four hours. Understand, Akise?"

"No, I don't," he replied honestly.

"Then I'll make myself clearer. The one known as 'the Third', Hiyama Monika-sensei from Sakurami High? She's holding reality together. If

she dies, the universe will literally crash, like a blue-screening computer."

"That makes no sense," said Akise.

"Yeah, I know, welcome to my world. But I assure you, it's the truth. If the fact that I'm willing to stake my life on it doesn't convince you, then just know this; I won't suffer *anyone* getting in my way."

"Steely words, Uryu-san," said Akise. At Natsuki's expression, he smiled, "Oh, yes, I recognize you, of course. The notorious international terrorist, 'Natsuki the Mad Bomber'. So tell me, why should I trust you?"

Natsuki scoffed and grinned, "Sure, soon as you tell me why you brought the Mad Bomber home and gave her first aid instead of letting the law have me."

Akise said nothing.

Natsuki shrugged. "Maybe it was the will of "God" that you saved me? Either way, I don't care if God is on my side or set against me. I'm *going* to protect my friends. No question. You don't need to help me. In fact, you've helped me enough as it is. But if you feel a vested interest in making sure the sun rises tomorrow, I'd be glad to have a hand. You're one of the only people in this mess I would accept help from."

Akise raised an eyebrow. "You know of me?"

"I know of you," said Natsuki, "I know a lot of stuff no one should know. Here's the skinny; God is dying, and he's picked a handful of people to play a game. A survival game. These individuals have been given 'Diaries' that tell the future. Yuri, Gasai, Monika, and myself are among them. Two…hold on, 'Fifth almost electrocutes–' well crap. Okay, *three* other Diary Owners appear to have teamed up and they're holding Monika at the Omekata Cult's compound. Those Diary Owners are this city's Chief of Police, a five-year-old boy who

happens to be a genius, and the Omekata High Priestess. So I'm going up against a cult of fanatics *and* the police department. And again, Gasai has Yuri. My Diary says Yuri isn't in danger of dying right now, but I'm still *really* uncomfortable with my best friend being at the mercy of that psycho."

"Hmm. Well, you don't *seem* to be lying, so you're either telling the truth or your just insane enough to believe your own convoluted fantasy," Akise concluded.

"Well, hey, tell ya what. You wanna know what's going on? Come with me. See for yourself. But first, bring me either a knife and a lighter, or a needle and thread," said Natsuki, "And painkillers, if you've got them. Non-narcotic, preferably."

Akise just stared at her for a moment, but then he smirked. "Oh, why not? Truth or madness, this all sounds way too fascinating to ignore." With that, he left the room. While he was gone, Natsuki had an idea and opened her phone's internet browser. By the time Akise had returned, she had found what she was looking for. "Huh. I was half-expecting you would have fled through the window," Akise remarked as he flipped a switch next to the door. The room became much more brightly lit. He then crossed the room and sat a tray down on the bed. On the tray was a steak knife, a lighter, a bottle of isopropyl alcohol, and a bottle of pills.

Natsuki shook her head, "You said you keep a journal, right?"

"An investigations journal, yes. I'm an aspiring detective, you know."

Natsuki showed him the site on her phone, "Let me see it. And your phone, if you don't mind."

"Why?" Akise asked.

"Because if you post enough entries to this site, your phone will become a Future Diary as well. Well, not a true Future Diary, but rather an 'Apprentice Diary'. Which works as well as the real deal but

without the glaring disadvantage of being your Achilles' Heel. See, if a true Future Diary is broken, its Owner is erased from existence. Anyways, I'll have to start doing it for you, seeing as time is short and I need you to take care of the gunshots in my back."

"…and you're certain you haven't lost it?" asked Akise as he walked over to his dresser.

"I'll level with you, Akise," said Natsuki as she cut through her chest bandages and laid down on her stomach. "At this point, I think I may have literally gone mad with desperation and anger. Events seem to be conspiring to keep me and my friends apart and in constant danger. And I am *soooooo* done with it all. So to hell with it. If I have to, I'll fight crazy with crazy. This world is going to find out what happens when you screw with our literature club." Akise handed her his phone and his journal, a spiral-bound notebook with a black cover. She opened the Eighth's website on Akise's phone and getting to work.

Naturally, blood was running freely (though thankfully not spurting) and she was finding it much harder to breathe. And of course it hurt like hell when Akise started pressing the hot knife to her injuries. Natsuki thought of Yuri, of what Yuno might do to her. She imagined Monika at the mercy of that cult. *'Pain? What pain?'*

"So, why did I bring you those painkillers, again?" Akise asked as he started on the second wound.

Natsuki rolled her eyes. "They weren't for this. We need to do this ASAP, I don't have time to wait for my body to go numb. They're for my legs."

"Well, I'll say this: your friends are certainly lucky to have such a devoted defender."

It took a lot longer than Natsuki liked, and near the end she was feeling faint again. Both from the blood loss itself, and nausea. But Akise did the dirty work, and generously applied the alcohol

afterwards. Natsuki sat up and handed Akise his phone and journal. "Keep going until the site tells you you've been promoted to 'Apprentice'. Got anything to drink?"

"Iced tea and melon juice in the fridge. And tap water, of course."

Natsuki groaned. "Kind of wish you had something stiffer…but this really isn't the time for that, I guess. I'll be right back."

Akise looked up from his phone. "I could–"

"No, I need to get mobile anyways. And you need to keep posting!" she snapped as she hobbled out of the room, taking the pill bottle with her. She stopped in the doorway and looked back. "Hey, you got Hino Hinata's number?"

Akise's head snapped back up again and he *stared* at her. Rather than ask how and why he knew about one of his classmates, he merely nodded. "Call her, and tell her you *need* to talk to her father. Make it very clear that you can't take no for an answer. *When* you get him on the line, tell him verbatim "Ninth wants to form an alliance with you, Tenth, to take down Second, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth *tonight* ." Give him my number and tell him that he has ten minutes to decide. *But don't give him your address* . If he calls me, I'll hammer out the details with him. Got all that?"

"I'm almost starting to believe that you actually know what all is going on. Very well, Uryu-san."

"Thanks," said Natsuki as she went to get that drink.

Part 5

May 1 st , 10:00 PM.

Police Chief Kurusu Keigo, "The Fourth", took a long pull from his cigarette as he regarded the woman sitting calmly in the cell before him. She appeared to be meditating. He glanced down, once again,

at his Investigation Diary. It continued to predict that he would kill her at midnight, by shooting her in the head. However, for whatever reason, there were no predictions after that. Only the words "DEAD END". Tsubaki, high priestess and oracle of the Omekata cult and the Sixth in the Survival Game, reported the same prediction in her Clairvoyance Diary. " *2 May, Midnight, Fourth kills Third. DEAD END.* "

(Although neither Keigo or Tsubaki knew it the Fifth, whose parents were members of Omekata, was also on the compound and wondering why his Hyper Vision Diary only had two predictions left in it, the latter being a man shooting a woman with long brown hair in the head, with the words DEAD END scrawled underneath.)

Up in the Oracle's Audience Room, Muru Muru was with Tsubaki, and she was also intensely curious about this phenomenon. She had visited the home of John Bacchus and checked his Watcher while he slept; it confirmed that *every single Future Diary* , including the numerous Apprentice Diaries, had a DEAD END flag with the same prediction of Fourth killing Third at midnight that night. Even more curiously, the Diaries of First, Third, Ninth, and Twelfth all mentioned a "Loop Crash". *'If this keeps up, I'm going to have to unseal her memories and convince her to do another Time Leap. I just don't get it! This didn't happen in the First World. And First, Third, and Ninth have all been acting super-weird. And Twelfth is supposed to be here, but she's gone off the script too! Did Yuno's Time Leap really do so much damage to the fabric of reality?'*

Just then, Muru Muru felt a spark in the back of her mind. The memory sealing spell she had cast on Yuno had just broken. "Oy, Sixth," she said to Tsubaki, "I'm going to…go…check in with Deus, yeah! See if he's worked out this bug in the Diaries yet."

Tsubaki nodded. Then, seeing as she didn't know when she would see the imp again, she quickly spoke up, "Before you go, I have to ask…why does out Diaries still foretell Third's death at Fourth's hand? Surely he has no intention of going through with it, does he?"

"How should I know what's going on in his head?" asked Muru Muru. And without further ado, she disappeared.

Back below ground, with Keigo and Monika. "You look awfully calm, considering you're stuck in a cell, surrounded by enemies, with no idea where your Diary is," Keigo remarked.

"Panicking won't help me out, now will it?" Monika reasoned.

"Hey, cut the act, Third," said Keigo stiffly, "I'll admit, you've convinced me that I shouldn't try you at poker, but there's no way in hell any sane person could be so calm in your situation."

"Then maybe I'm crazy," Monika replied dully. "I went quite mad, once. It wouldn't be anything new. The facts are thus; with me in this cell and that gun at your side, you can kill me any time you'd like, Chief Kurusu. I've made my peace with that. All I can hope for is that my friends will…well, actually, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to be honest with you. To tell the truth, I hope my friends stay far, far away from here. I don't want them putting themselves at risk for me."

"You want to know what I don't get?" Keigo asked, "I know that Uryu Natsuki is an Owner, and that you went after her. My Diary also told me you were going to kill the First, until that prediction suddenly changed. How is it possible that those two became your comrades afterwards?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Monika said simply.

"Try me."

Monika sighed. "Fine. I'm a time traveler from another universe. So are Yuri and Natsuki. In our home universe, we're high school students in a literature club, which I'm the president of. Actually, we're not even that; we're actually characters from a dating sim game with the premise that we're all members of a high school literature club. Except I knew I was a character in a game and became romantically obsessed with the Player, but as a support

character I didn't have a "route", so I tortured and brainwashed the other girls in my club, causing two of them to kill themselves. Then I just deleted all three of them and pretty much just rewrote the game so it would be just me and the Player. Then the Player deleted my character file, and out of guilt I restored everything I had destroyed. But then I Woke Up back at the very beginning of the game, before I had done anything, and no one else remembered. The second time, I stayed on the sidelines where I belonged and let the game run its course. Then I wound up back at the beginning, again. This cycle played out many times, until one day a Player named Jenny explained to me that my universe was one of countless many, and that the World-Tree-Supercomputer, Yggdrasil, was broken. And because if this, all of reality had been put into a series of ever-repeating temporal recursions; Time Loops, in layman's terms. Jenny said that those who remembered the Loops, like me and her, were called Loopers, and that there were hundreds of us scattered across the Multiverse. One-by-one, the other girls in my club, Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki, all 'Activated' as Loopers, like me. Most of our loops are normal, but sometimes we have 'variant' loops; sometimes this means one thing is noticeably different, sometimes this means *everything* is different beyond recognition. And sometimes we loop into *other* universe altogether. Like this one."

Monika took a deep breath. "So, you see, up until yesterday afternoon this body belonged to a very different Monika. The one who…who did all those horrible things…then, I Woke Up, meaning my real personality too over and I regained all my memories of the Loops. Yuri had already been "Awake" for several days. Natsuki Woke Up that same day, so she's not the bomb-happy terrorist you think of her as, either. And despite all the horrible things I did in our original timeline–what we call our "Baseline"–we've managed to mend our friendship. It helps that we've experienced several *thousands* of years together in the Loops. So that's why we teamed up. Because we're very dear friends who love one another; because we're the only family any of us have. And any one of us would risk life and limb for the others. Even though dying just means we move along to the next Loop. Dying, even temporarily, is never a pleasant

feeling. Except for Yuri. But she understands that her dying upsets us, so she does her best to keep alive. Unless she's in a Loop without us and gets bored; she's never said so, but I suspect she might have a hobby of 'collecting' interesting or memorable deaths. Maybe. That's just me speculating."

(Elsewhere, Yuri suddenly sneezed. And felt a surge of embarrassment, for no discernable reason. She shook it off and kept running.)

Keigo blinked. "So…yes, you're certifiably insane."

"Oh, it gets better," said Monika, opening her eyes and smiling. "The first Looper to Activate in any given world is its "Anchor". Every Loop iteration requires an Anchor to run. If the Anchor dies, the Loop crashes. And *that's* why every Diary is getting a dead end flag from *my* death. Because when I die, I take this whole universe with me. Which, I'm assuming, counts as a form of death for everyone in this reality. Unfortunately, as an Anchor, I'm entrusted with a responsibility to *prevent* Loop crashes. So if I die and this loop does crash, the Admins–the gods in charge of administrating and trying to repair Yggdrasil–are going to send me and my friends to very unpleasant world as a Punishment Loop…in simpler terms, you can think of it as being put in time out in Hell."

Keigo raised an eyebrow. "Only a time out?"

"Well, yes. All loops end, eventually. Even punishment loops. We'll probably be sent home afterwards. Multiple consecutive punishment loops only happen if you screwed up majorly. Like, if I went out of my way to crash this loop on purpose, or if I crashed the loop while trying to do something *really* stupid. But still, punishment loops are always insufferable, so we try our best to avoid them, which is the whole point," said Monika, standing up and stretching. "So, how's your son?" she asked out of nowhere.

Keigo narrowed his eyes and glared at her. To his surprise, Monika blushed. "Ah…oh, heavens, that must have…I'm so sorry, I didn't

mean…sorry," she mumbled, basting her eyes downward. Keigo anger was replaced with frank surprise. *'Not very becoming of a hardened killer,'* he noted. "I only meant…never mind, it doesn't matter."

After a moment, Keigo sighed and replied, "He's been under the weather, lately. We've had to take him out of school, even. We took him to see a doctor; right now we're waiting for the results."

Monika nodded. "I'll keep him in my prayers, Chief Kurusu." She sat down, crossed her legs, and closed her eyes again.

…

May 1 st , 10:00 PM

Muru Muru popped back into the material world above Yuno's head. A moment after, something caught her by the ankle, and she suddenly found herself slammed into the street. Then into a nearby brick wall. Then the street, then a lamppost, then the street again, then the wall again…

Then she was reeled in and someone kicked her *hard* in the head, bouncing her off of the street and into the side of a parked car. Needless to say, she was quite thoroughly disoriented and possibly even concussed.

Yuno just stared at the dazed and swirly-eyed imp, and then at the young woman who had done all of that without moving her head or changing her expression. "So, as I was saying, Yuno…we need to have a heart-to-heart. Believe or not, I understand your feelings…but you have to realize the situation you've created can't go on. You'll condemn countless timelines to oblivion. And with each one, billions of people with hopes, dreams, and loves of their own will be destroyed. And what's worst of all, as far as you're concerned…each Game has to end with you killing the one person you truly care about out of all those billions. I know the first time broke your heart, and that was an accident. The first time was a mistake, right? You never

meant to hurt Yuri. It was just bad luck. But for you to reclaim the power of God and make the next Time Leap, you're going to have to kill her on purpose. Can you really, truly bring yourself to do that, Yuno? And if you can, how many times can you do it until your heart is completely destroyed? What good is having a Yuri if your heart has become too broken to love her anymore?"

For most of Sayori's lecture, Yuno had kept up a steady mantra of "Shut up, shut up, shut up…Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP! SHUT THE HELL UP!" By now, tears were running from her eyes.

"You're only getting angry because you know I'm right," said Sayori. "But you and I? We both know the truth. The real truth. And that truth is…you don't really love Yuri at all. You never did. Her love is just an illusion you use to give your life meaning. A crutch for your shattered spirit to hobble about with. You could just as well have replaced her with anyone."

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH!" Yuno screamed, running at her with her fist drawn back.

Sayori leaned slightly to the right, letting Yuno's fist fly by within millimeters of her face. With lightning speed and a casual air, she wrapped one hand around Yuno's wrist and put the other hand under her armpit, and with a quick levering motion Yuno found herself yanked off of her feet and sailing through the air, flipping over and landing on her back. The wind was knocked out of her, and before she could recover she felt Sayori's whip catch around her foot, and suddenly she found herself flying through the air again. This time, she slammed into the same car Muru Muru had been thrown into, and the imp let out a pained squeak when Yuno landed on top of her.

"I understand the pain of feeling worthless, Yuno. Yuri understands the pain of feeling alone and misunderstood. Our friend Natsuki knows how it feels to be neglected, to feel unloved by someone who's supposed to love you implicitly. And our friend Monika…she understands how you feel right now; being driven to madness and psychopathy by a fake love for someone, when really that person is

just an escape from the hellish reality you're trapped in. Under different circumstances, we could have been friends, Yuno. And if my hundreds of thousands of years in the Time Loops have taught me anything, it's what I should have realized all along. That Philias is a much deeper and more meaningful love than Eros. It's nice to have a lover, don't get me wrong…or at least, I imagine it must be. It surely sounds like a lovely thought," Sayori's voice grew wistful, "But friendship is much more important, to feel like a worthwhile person. To be in love means giving yourself to someone, and taking from them in turn. Friendship isn't that serious. All friends have to do is understand one another, even when they can't really understand how you feel, and to take joy in each other's company. And when your friends are always there for you, ready to give everything they can to help you, because they know you feel exactly the same way, without having to hear you say it? Well, that's when friends become family. And family is the best kind of love you can have. Friends may drift apart, and lovers may break up, but family…family, if they really are family, will always be there to catch you when you fall. When you feel worthless, or alone, or unloved, or even when you feel a little crazy…family does more than just love. Family *cares* , Yuno."

As she spoke, Sayori had approached, very slowly so as not to disrupt her focused hearing. By the time she finished, she was crouched in front of Yuno and offering an outstretched hand. Yuno looked up at her, furious, but her fury gave way to surprise when she saw Sayori's face. She, too, was crying, and her expression was pained. When she spoke, her voice matched that pain. "Yuno, my family is in *danger* . I…I *can't* stand the thought of any of them getting hurt, Yuno. It hurts like a knife twisting in my heart. I can't imagine any pain worse than seeing *them* in pain. And you're the only one who can help me save them! Please, Yuno, I'm *begging* you…help me protect my family. If there was ever any part of you that ever really cared about Yuri, even just a little, if there's anything in you that's still human, I need you to help me protect her, and the others too. I know they're all angry with you…and let's be honest, not without reason. But maybe we can still change that. We can all be friends. We can save them from the other Owners, and then we can

save *you* from your despair. We can help you save the *world* , Yuno, because *you're the only one who can* !"

Then Sayori threw her whip aside, well out of her reach. "There. I'm unarmed. I'm completely at your mercy. What now, Yuno? You're the one who decides how this story ends. What do you say? Can you and I be friends, Gasai Yuno?"

…

May 1 st , 10:30 PM.

Natsuki smiled. "Don't panic, Akise. But we've been surrounded."

"So, you noticed as well?" Akise replied, his expression neutral and his voice as smooth and cool as a frozen lake.

"Tch, yeah! You're dealing with a pro here, kid," Natsuki replied. Her legs protested when she stood up from the park bench, but she had long-since stopped listening. The burns on her back *screamed* when she stretched, but she ignored that as well. At this point, all pain was being channeled into a reservoir that she intended to unload on Gasai the next time she saw her. And no matter how much it hurt, appearing completely casual and at ease, and by implication in total control of the situation, was *crucial* to her strategy. Because the truth was, even with Akise's help (and she knew he was no slouch in a fight) she knew that in her current state she stood no chance against the two or three or maybe even *four* dozen trained, killer attack dogs that were hiding all around them right now. "C'mon out, Tenth. I ain't got all night," she called out into the darkness.

In response, seven dogs came padding out of the woods in 'V' formation. As they got closer, Natsuki saw that they all had little cameras mounted on their heads. Naturally, they all had metal teeth as well, which they were snapping to decent dramatic effect. The lead dog also had a little speaker on his collar, from whence issue a man's voice. "Good evening, Ninth–"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. We can wank around with pleasantries and formalities some other night," said Natsuki irritably, "Tonight, we're on a serious time crunch. My associates and I are going to *war* with the Omekata Cult and the Sakurami City Police Department, and their leaders; the Fourth and Sixth Diary Owners. And if all goes according to plan, when he wakes up and checks his Diary in the morning, Eleventh is going to *shit his pants* . Are you in or out?"

"Just one question, if you don't mind indulging an old man," replied Tenth, "What did you mean about Eleventh? Do you know his identity?"

"That, and the nature of his Diary," Natsuki answered, "The Eleventh is none other than the mayor himself, John Bacchus. His Diary, The Watcher, tells him *what all our Diaries tell us* . The main goal of tonight's mission is to rescue one of the members of our alliance, Third. As a side-perk, it's my hope that this will serve as a rude wake-up call for Mayor Man. Now, I've answered your question and given you invaluable information besides. Are you in, Tenth, or are you out? This is the last time I'm asking."

"…very well. Consider my dogs at your disposal, Ninth. What is your plan?"

Natsuki pulled out her phone. "I'm texting you coordinates. Send your dogs there. *All of them* . In addition to a whole cult of fanatics and the full might of Sakurami's Finest, the enemy alliance also includes the Fifth and possibly the Twelfth Owners, both of whom are dangerous individuals. My intelligence has it that Fifth already knows an attack is coming and has decided to reveal himself to Fourth and Sixth, sharing what he knows. So they're all on high alert as it is. The good news is, Fifth's Diary only gives him three predictions a day, only one of which is for the evening. And that prediction is foretelling an independent strike from another of our allies; namely, First. And while Second isn't a member of the '4-5-6' Alliance, she has her sights set on our ally First, so she's to be considered as a problematic element."

"So to summarize," spoke up Akise, "Our Alliance at present has five members, our opposition has three or four members, as well as police resources and a considerable amount of manpower, and the operation has to account for at least one other wild card. One of our allies is held hostage in the heart of the enemy camp, and another of our allies is the target of that wild card. Have I got all that straight, Ninth?"

"Rhetorical question is rhetorical," Natsuki snarked back, heading over to the truck she and Akise had commandeered. "Get the dogs you sent here in the truckbed, Tenth. Or as many as will fit, at least. The others here won't make it to the rendezvous in time, so just send them to the Omekata compound, but have them *hold position* outside of the parameter. Fourth has cops posted all over the surrounding neighborhood as extra security."

"Does any of this have anything to do with my Diary telling me I'll die if Fourth kills Third?" Tenth asked.

"Yes," said Natsuki as she hotwired the truck, "Now that's all the questions you get for tonight. Time to shut up and nut up."

After sixteen dogs had packed themselves into the truckbed, which Tenth said was all the dogs he had sent, Natsuki started driving out of the park.

…

May 1 st , 11:15 PM

Yuri checked her phone as she neared the Omekata compound, staying close to the shadows and avoiding the police patrolmen walking the streets. *'Quarter after…cutting it close,'* Yuri thought with dismay. She managed to locate the suitcase across the street from the compound, and then ducked into an alleyway to see what was in it. She smiled as she pulled out a dark purple hakama and gi, which she quickly changed into, as well as a pair of forearm-guards, a forehead protector, two bandoliers stocked with kunai throwing

knives which she put on across her chest, a daisho pair that she tucked into the belt of her hakama, a case full of shuriken that she clipped onto her belt on the other side, along with her pouch of darts, a tanto dagger that she tucked into her bra, and a dozen smoke grenades that she pocketed. Finally, she found a note. *'Reminder: Sixth has a Diary that reports everything her cultists see, so avoid them as much as you can; Fifth has one prediction for the evening, so he* might *have an ambush ready for you. Watch out for that. But don't be a Worry-Yuri. I've been busy making friends, and help is on the way. You won't be alone for long. Good luck! Love, Sayori~'*

"Thank you, Sayori," Yuri said softly. She turned her eyes back to the Omekata compound, and steeled herself. She stepped out of the shadows–

Her phone suddenly started buzzing. She checked it and saw a text from an unfamiliar number. *Don't make your move just yet,* it read, *Seventh are about to make an unexpected play!*

Yuri stepped back into the darkness, and a minute later she heard a loud noise. A moment after, a white convertible roared down the street, blasting rap music at a volume that was completely indecent for the late hour. Yuri processed a quick glimpse of a man with a pompadour behind the wheel, while a woman sat in the back *and shot several cops* .

Admittedly, with what had evidently been a paintball gun. Still, the officers started running about, and soon after several squad cars took off in hot pursuit after the hooligan couple. Within seconds, Yuri found the path before her quite clear. So without wasting any more time, she sprinted out of the shadows, drawing two kunai from her bandoliers as she ran. She threw herself at the compound wall and quickly scaled to the top. She balanced atop the wall and pulled out four smoke grenades, two in each hand, pulled out the pins with her teeth and hurled them into the courtyard. In less than a minute the courtyard was choked with obfuscating fog. Yuri jumped down into the smoke, and started beating a mad dash for the main building.

The Seventh Diary Owners, Ikusaba Marco and Mikami Ai, continued driving around the neighborhood, leading a few cops on a wild goose chase. A friend of theirs and fellow orphan from Mother's Village, Nanba Taro, was doing the same thing on a moped, steering with one hand and using the other to throw fireworks around. With Marco and Ai's Exchange Diaries, which Taro's Copy Diary was synchronized to, the three were able to coordinate their seemingly random shenanigans expertly. Another friend and fellow orphan, Miyashiro Orin, who was posing as a Omekata cultist, gave a signal on her Orphan Diary, and the "Mother's Village" Orphan Army began storming the compound's back entrance. They first launched tear gas at the police guard, and then chucked a volley of Molotov cocktails at the outer wall before rushing in with gasmasks and an assortment of melee implements as well as a few airsoft and paintball guns.

While Yuri rushed in from the compounds east side, Natsuki drove a semi-truck through the wall on the west side, screaming, "OH, YEAH!". As soon as she hit the brakes, before she had even came to a full stop, Akise jumped out of the passenger side and ran towards the back of the trailer, which he opened with frantic haste. From the safety of his home, Tsukishima Karyudo gave an order through his Breeder Diary, and his full force of fifty attack dogs streamed out of the trailer and scattered throughout the Omekata courtyard. The cultists and police responded with appropriate force, opening fire on their attackers. Keigo, the Fourth, and Tsubaki, the Sixth, both stared at their Diaries in shock. So was John Bacchus, mayor of Sakurami City, as he sat up in bed, having been awakened by the constant roar of static from his own, all-seeing Diary. Monika smiled as the sound of chaos reached her ears.

The Diary War had begun.

Part 6

May 1 st , 12:32 AM

"Ah~" said Sayori happily, "You're tea is *amazing* Ueshita-san! And I know a thing or two about good tea."

"Thank you, Hirasaka-san," replied Ueshita Kamado. She was… interesting to look at, that was for sure. She had the proportions of a "chibi" character, but blown-up to the height of a normal person. Maybe a little more? Her *head* was bigger than some of the children under her care. Yeah, she more than a little odd to see the first time. "So, I'm told you had a business proposal for me?"

"Well…yes and no," Sayori admitted, glancing down at her tea. "I do have a proposition of great importance for you…but out of a desire to protect my identity, I deliberately mislead you to think it was a business thing, knowing that your orphanage's financial problems would make it easy for me to get my foot in the door, as it were. The unpleasant reality is that my proposal actually relates to the Survival Game. I know that you're the Eighth. Well, I'm the Twelfth." Sayori took another sip of her tea, while the sounds of guns cocking and knives being drawn surrounded her. Even as Kamado called for everyone to calm down, Sayori slowly lowered her cup and lifted her hands high. "Relax, everyone, I came in peace. Unarmed and all that good noise."

"You're an obstacle on the Director's path to Godhood," growled Nanba Taro as he put a gun to the back of Sayori's head. "And why should we trust you? If you're a Diary Owner it's going to come down to you or her anyways. She doesn't need to ally with other Owners when she has us."

"It's very wise of you not to trust other Owners, Nanba-kun," said Sayori calmly, "But in me, your mistrust is misplaced. I, too, have no interest in becoming God. And unlike your beloved Director, I don't have anyone else pushing me there. Frankly, I want no part in the Game, but just sitting it out isn't an option for me, either. You see, I have three very dear friends who, unfortunately, have also been made Diary Owners. I want to save them. In fact, I have a plan to resolve the Game without *any* Owners having to die. It's sweet and all that you kids love your matron enough that you're all willing to kill

to make her God. But wouldn't you rather not have to kill anyone at all? I know Kamado-san doesn't want anyone's blood on anyone's hands."

Silence reigned as everyone pondered her words. "Everyone, put your weapons away," Kamado insisted. "So, what's your plan then, Twelfth?"

"Oh, please, call me Sayori," said Sayori with a smile.

May 1 st , 11:23 PM

The compound of the Omekata Cult was sheer chaos. Most of the "Mother's Village" Orphan Army, under the leadership of Apprentice Diary Owner Orin, were attacking from one side. They laid down smoke bombs for cover, and from within the smoke they hurled various kinds of firebombs every which way. Fire was just *everywhere* before long. The bomb-throwers were protected by orphans armed with airsoft cannons that fired such things as tennis balls, potatoes, bean bags, and so forth at anyone who approached them with hostile intent, as well as paintball guns that were used to effectively blind their enemies. Meanwhile, Seventh Future Diary Owners Marco and Ai, along with Apprentice Diary Owner Taro, were driving around the surrounding neighborhood raising hell with fireworks, colorful smoke grenades, and paintball guns, all for the purpose if distracting and dividing the police, who were the decidedly stronger half of the enemy alliance.

Meanwhile, the police and cultists also had to deal with fifty ravenous metal-toothed killer attack dogs running amok throughout the courtyard. And fighting their way through the mob of insanity were two women on a mission. Yuri, in full battle-garb, cut a bloody swath through her obstacles with sword in hand, using kunai, shuriken, and darts to fend off any cop that drew a gun on her. She did her best not to land any fatal blows, but she knew she couldn't afford to hesitate either.

On her end, Natsuki was plowing through with a new baseball bat that she swung without restraint. Her dress had been replaced with a denim jacket over a pink tee-shirt and a pink ankle-length skirt, to hide the splints and bandages on her legs; on her feet were a pair of steel-toe boots. The painkillers had kicked in, so she hardly felt any complaints from her back or her legs. Of course, she knew she would be a pretty wrecked mess when all was said and done, but she'd be happy just to live that long. She had been fighting alongside Akise, but they had gotten separated at some point after she started making for the main building. It was starting to burn, too, so it was more imperative than ever to find Monika.

Then, in the main building, they met.

"YURI!" Natsuki screamed in relief.

"NATSUKI?!" Yuri yelped in surprise.

The two friends collided in a fierce hug in the middle of the raging melee. Then they remembered what was going on around them, and they went back-to-back to fend off the horde of ax-wielding cultists. "Where's Gasai?" Natsuki asked.

"Don't get mad at me, and don't ask me why because I don't get it either…but I left her with Sayori."

"WHAT?! You found Sayori? *You left her with the psycho?!* "

"No, I left *her* with *Sayori* . She seemed to have control of the situation and assured me she had a plan. I think this other group attacking the police and the cultists is her doing."

"So she's the one who brought Eighth in…then she's the Twelfth!"

"How do you figure that?"

"Long story short: I've got the most broken-ass Diary in the Game on my side, and it said Twelfth and Eighth had teamed up and were

going to throw down in this ruckus. Which we factored into the timing of our own attack."

"Ninth!" hollered Akise as he bull-rushed through the swarm of cultists and cops with a bo-staff. "Ninth, we've got a serious problem!"

"I told you to call me Natsuki! What is it, Akise? Oh, Akise, this is Yuri. Yuri, Akise Aru."

"Pleased to meet you, Akise-san," said Yuri without even looking at him as she cut down another cultist.

"Likewise," said Akise off-handedly as he all but shoved his new Apprentice Diary, the "Detective Diary", in Natsuki's face. Her eyes widened and she started cussing viciously.

"We have to grab Monika and get out of here, *now* ," she hissed.

"What's wrong?" asked Yuri.

"The Mayor of the city has a Diary that reads everyone else's Diary," said Natsuki, "Even the Apprentice Diaries made by Eighth's Propogating Diary. He knows what's going on. He knows most of the Owners are right here, right now, *and as we speak he's trying to bring the JSDF down on our heads!* "

"What!?"

Static blared, and Yuri quickly whipped out her Diary. She stared in shock at what she saw.

[May 2 nd , 0:00, Omekata Compound]

Natsuki, Akise, and I are gunned down by soldiers.

DEAD END.

"Soldiers?!" Yuri exclaimed.

"The Mayor's spinning some crazy story about the Omekata being a terrorist sect with plans to make some kind of bioweapon, to convince the Self-Defense Force to make a strike on this compound," Akise explained.

"I don't know, I'm feeling a little terrorized, to be honest," Natsuki quipped as she cracked a cultist in the head, dropping him like the sack of fail that he was. She looked around, "I'll be damned, I think we ran out of 'em."

Another burst of static sounded from one of Yuri's pockets, and she pulled out Monika's phone. "I thought this didn't work anymore? Eh? Oh my…guys, this way!" said Yuri, running back out of the building.

"Akise, find Sixth, see if you can use her to end the fighting outside."

"And then what?" asked Akise.

"What?" asked Natsuki, stopping and looking back to him.

"What's our endgame, Ninth?" Akise asked, very serious-faced. "I've gone along with you so far because you convinced me you were in control of the situation. But this situation seems anything *but* controlled."

"No shit I don't," said Natsuki frankly, "But taking Sixth as a hostage will force the cult and the police to stand down, at least momentarily."

"And then what?" Akise pressed.

"Then we get Monika and we get the hell out of Doge! Duh."

"And everyone else?"

"Is on their own," Natsuki said flatly. "Yes, I know full well how that sounds and I don't like it either. I'm not a sociopath or anything. But my only stake in all this is getting my friends out of here alive. If the rest of the Owners are so bent on tearing each other apart, that's

their business. I have to worry about me and mine. Now enough questions, we're on a *serious* time crunch here!"

With that, Natsuki took off after Yuri again. Akise, frowning, consulted his Diary.

…

Following the instructions in Monika's Diary, it didn't take long for Yuri to find the toolshed which hid the entrance to the Omekata's very own secret dungeon. *'Tacky, bland, and unoriginal, as far as dungeons go,'* Yuri mentally critiqued as she descended, *'1/10 stars. And that's me being generous.'*

Quite abruptly, she found herself slammed in the back as she heard Natsuki scream, "Look out!"

Knocked flying off of the bottom step, Yuri found herself and Natsuki sailing over an ankle-deep pit that had been gouged into the floor. It had been filled with water, and in the gloom Yuri never would have noticed it until it was too late.

"Darn it. You avoided my trap," said a childish, petulant voice in the darkness.

"Gonna have to wake up a lot earlier than that to fool my Protector Diary, Fifth," Natsuki growled as she struggled to her feet. Pain erupted all over her body, the color drained from her face, and she staggered against the wall, falling to her knees as she suddenly felt light-headed. Then, she detected a strange smell. "No…" she groaned weakly. She tried to stand again, but Yuri put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down, gently.

"Enough. You've done enough, Natty," Yuri said softly, "Let me take it from here, okay?"

"Gas…" Natsuki whimpered.

"I know," said Yuri. She ripped a strip from the leg of her pants and pressed it against her nose, keeping her mouth clamped shut. She proceeded forward into the darkness, sword held in front of her.

"Your friend saved you from my electrocution trap," said the hidden boy, Fifth, "Lucky break for you. But you're still going to die down here, gasping for breath." His voice sounded muffled.

"Spare me," Yuri snapped. "Your world is starting to annoy me. I don't like people threatening my friends." She reached the end of the hallway. She faced a heavy, metal door.

Static. Natsuki screamed, "Yuri, look out!"

Yuri whirled around, but she felt something jab her in the side. *'A needle!'*

The effect was immediate. Yuri's head started swimming. Her whole lower body felt numb, and despite her efforts she soon collapsed. Then she saw him.

A boy, no more than five years old, with green eyes behind a gasmask and ginger hair sticking out from under a green hat. Yuri had no idea what she had been injected with, but she was pretty sure it was doing something to her head because her first thought was *'There's definitely a "soulless ginger" joke here, but for the life of me I can't think of one.'*

"I had expected more of the one designated 'The First'," the boy lamented.

"My sin…cerest…apolo…gies…for disapp-p-p…pointing…you…" Yuri pushed herself to gasp out.

"For frak's sake, *cough* Yuri, *don't* *hack-cough* *apologize to the little freak!* " Natsuki wheezed. She pulled something out from behind her back, pulled a pin out of it with her teeth and chucked it between Yuri and the boy before clapping a hand over her eyes.

The flashbang went off, and Yuri's senses were obliterated. She was randomly reminded of when Monika had described to her what it was like for her when the game was off. Yuri decided that, going off of Monika's description, getting flashbanged seemed like a fairly close analogy.

Unfortunately, before her hearing and sight could recover, Yuri passed out when the thickening gas made it impossible to breathe.

Less than a minute later, the door to the dungeon was opened again. Akise propped the trapdoor open before descending. Hopping lightly over Fifth's cunning water trap, he found Natsuki, Yuri, and a small boy all unconscious. Natsuki was between Yuri and the boy, bat in hand. Akise frowned. He wouldn't be able to carry all three of them out at once, but he had no desire to leave anyone to asphyxiate. *'Ninth, being dead-set as she is on protecting her friends, would probably be upset if I got her out before First,'* he reasoned. Moving quickly, he removed Fifth's gasmask and put it on Natsuki, then he slung Yuri over his shoulder, picked up Fifth with his other hand, and hurried back up the stairs. Then he went back down for Natsuki.

Upon his return, he found that the metal door had been opened, and two gasmasked cultists were pulling Natsuki inside. Before they could shut the door, Akise bull-rushed them and plowed his way into the room beyond. He found himself in a tangled pile with Natsuki, who was whimpering in pain, and the cultists. He quickly found himself struggling with the cultists as he tried to get up and they tried to pin him. Then he heard a gun cocking, and found himself facing a gun held by one Chief Inspector Kurusu Keigo. Like any reasonable person faced with a loaded gun, Akise quit struggling.

"Close the door," ordered a long-haired girl sitting in a chair behind Keigo. Judging by her elaborate clothes, Akise pegged her as the Oracle, Sixth. One of the cultists jumped up and saw to the door, while the other bound Akise's wrists behind his back with a zip tie. Once the door was closed, that cultist returned to the Oracle's side.

"So, who are you?" asked Keigo, smiling jovially down at Akise. "Are you another Diary Owner?"

"Not strictly speaking," replied Akise, "I'm simply an ally of the Ninth."

"I see. And what inspired you to get involved in this crazy game?" Keigo asked.

"Does that really matter, Fourth?" asked Sixth.

"What's your name, kid?" Keigo asked, ignoring her.

"Akise. Akise Aru."

"Hmm. Your name never came up in my Investigation Diary," Keigo remarked, "So the odds are pretty good you're not a bad person. So, I put it to you again; why are you involved?"

"Curiosity, I suppose," Akise replied. "I was curious why someone reputed as a mad bomber would endure so much pain and risk so much to *save* people in a game where there can only be one survivor."

"Obviously she was lying," said Sixth, sounding irritated, "She must be manipulating your sympathies to her own ends, you fool. Now enough of this. Put him in the cell with Third," she ordered. The cultist who had bound Akise's wrists hauled him up and did just that. Keigo kept his gun fixed on Akise the whole time. Unfortunately, focused as he was, and as effectively blind as Sixth was in the dimly lit room, neither of them noticed that Monika had taken the ribbon out of her hair and shifted from a sitting position to a crouching one. The cultist beside Sixth had noticed, but she had kept it herself…

The instant the cell door had opened, Monika had sprang up and grabbed one of the bars, yanking the door wide open. She shoved Akise down, grabbed the cultist and spun him around, holding him between herself and Keigo. Keigo opened fire anyways, hitting the unfortunate cultist three times before Monika shoved him forcefully at

the policeman. Keigo jumped out of the way, but before he could put his aim back on Monika she had lashed her ribbon around his gun and deftly yanked it out of his hand. Flipping the stolen firearm around in her hand, Monika opened up the revolver's carousel and dumped the remaining bullets onto the floor. Then she unceremoniously tossed the weapon over her shoulder.

"Okay, everyone," Monika said with a smile, "Let's all calm down, shall we? This *whole* day has just been exhaustingly stressful. Now, I think leaving this dreary room and hashing out our disagreements over a round of drinks sounds wonderful. I normally go for tea or coffee, but after a day like today I won't say no to something stronger. What do you two say?"

Keigo's reply was to put up his fists and take a swing at her.

Monika's rebuttal was to judo him into the metal door. "Sure ya don't want to revise that answer, Chief?" she asked blithely. Keigo could only hold his head and groan.

Sixth snorted and drew a gun from one of her sleeves, aiming towards the slender blur that was Monika. Then she felt a blade against her throat. "Put that down, nice and slow, Sixth," said the cultist next to her as she removed her gasmask. "Orin?" Sixth gasped, "Just what do you–"

"I'm with the Eighth, not you," Orin revealed bluntly, "So yeah, you just got…"punk'd", I think is how the Americans say it?"

Sixth scowled as she threw her gun down.

"So, are you guys with Twelfth?" Orin asked as Monika took a knife out of Akise's pocket and use it to cut through the zip tie.

"If Twelfth happens to be a girl named Sayori, then yes," replied Monika. She gave Natsuki's body a quick look-over, her face becoming a mask of pain as she took in the extent of her youngest club member's injuries. "Oh, Nat…" she sighed as she gingerly

picked her up in her arms. "Would someone be so kind as to get the door for me, please?"

"Sure," said Orin, sheathing her dagger and skipping over to the door.

"Wait!" said Akise, reading his Diary, "The Self-Defense Forces have mobilized. They'll descend upon this place within minutes!"

"Doesn't matter," Natsuki groaned, "Eleventh can read all our Diaries. They'll find us, even if we hide out down here. Monika, we gotta grab Yuri and bail…"

"Hush," said Monika gently as she left the room, "Everything is going to be fine. We'll figure it out. You just rest."

"I can still walk, darn it."

" *No.* Rest," Monika order forcefully.

"Yes, *Mom-ika* ," Natsuki muttered. "Oh, hey, watch out–"

"For the water, I know."

"C'mon, Sixth, Fourth, we're going for a walk," said Orin, pushing the Oracle and Inspector out after Monika, Sixth's abandoned gun in hand. Akise brought up the rear, picking up Natsuki's bat along the way.

"Eleven-fifty," Natsuki read from her phone, "We've got to get gone, quick…oy, Akise, where's Yuri?" she asked when they emerged from the trapdoor and she noticed the unconscious boy she had knocked out.

"I left her right here," the kid detective replied.

"GOD FUCKING DAMN IT WHY?!" Natsuki screamed, suddenly struggling to get out of Monika's arms.

"Calm down, Natsuki!" Monika demanded, "Does your Diary say she's in trouble?"

Natsuki just as suddenly stopped struggling and checked. "Of course. *Of course* ! Friggin' Psycho's got her *again* ," said Natsuki, gnashing her teeth.

"Yuno?" Monika asked.

The roar of helicopter blades started shaking the toolshed, soon followed by loud bursts of automatic gunfire. "Well damn," Keigo sighed. "Alright, in the interest of getting out of here alive, I'm willing to cooperate with you for now. Truce?"

"Sure," replied Monika, "Give me your Diary."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me," said Monika as she sat Natsuki down on her feet and picked something up off the floor. "Give me your Diary so I know I can trust you. I could have easily killed you downstairs, had I wished to, so you should already know you can trust me. I'm a horrible person, but I'm *not* a murderer…anymore."

"Hell of a sales pitch, Prez," Natsuki grumbled. "If it makes you feel any better, you can hold mine," she tossed her Diary to Keigo.

"Natsuki, what?!" Monika exclaimed.

"He's a good guy, Monika," replied Natsuki, "When it comes down to it, he'll do the right thing. I trust him."

Monika was floored. She swallowed, and nodded. Natsuki, she knew, did *not* hand out her trust casually. "If Natsuki trusts you, you can hold onto your own Diary. I don't care to hold someone else's life in my hands anyways. Now let's get out of here."

"One problem!" said Natsuki, "Yuri's Diary said we were going to get killed by soldiers. Any tips on avoiding that?"

"As it happens, I do," replied Monika, showing Natsuki what she had found on the floor. It was her own Diary, having fallen out of Yuri's pocket. Her eyes widened at the first line:

[Monika's Survival Tips For The Day!]

Then Monika pulled it back and continued reading it. She smiled, and started out of the shed. "Follow me, everyone. We'll get out of this alive…my 'Guidance' Diary will see to that."

Part 7

May 1 st , 10:05 PM:

"What do you say? Can you and I be friends, Gasai Yuno?" Sayori asked, reaching her hand out to the other girl. Yuno stared back at her with wide, almost uncomprehending eyes. She stared, mystified, into Sayori's own, milky-blue, unseeing orbs. The kindness, and then the pain, in Sayori's words stirred something in Yuno. Long-buried feelings from before the accident with her parents. All she had wanted was to be heard. To be understood. That was all she had wanted, back in that distant age before she had met Yuri, who had become the center of her world. That was all she had ever really wanted. For someone to listen to her. To understand her.

And here was Sayori, speaking of familiar pains, of friends who understood. Friends that could be her friends, maybe. Yuno felt an ache in her chest as a crack appeared in the bitter shell around her heart. She started to reach for Sayori's hand…

A pulse of dark energy struck Sayori in the side and sent her flying.

Muru Muru was back up, hovering in the air, flying after Sayori and bombarding her with a savage warcry. She was a pissed-off little imp, that was for certain.

"Stop it, Muru Muru!" Yuno screamed, jumping up to her feet.

Sayori jumped back onto her feet as well, and let loose her own scream to match Muru Muru's in ferocity and exceed hers' in volume. She pulled something out from inside of her robe, tied something around her finger even as she jumped, darted, and nimbly dodged the enraged familiar's magic blasts. Then Sayori shot out with her newly equipped yoyo and struck Muru Muru dead between the eyes. It turned out to be a lucky hit, though, as Sayori's next three attacks all sailed wide of the mark, even though Muru Muru was paralyzed with pain in mid-air. Then she recovered in time to conjure a bubble-like barrier around herself, deflecting a swing that would have struck her in the side.

Sayori, however, had not been standing still. She had been dashing all around, which Yuno took to be evasive maneuvers since she couldn't see that her enemy had been briefly incapacitated. Yuno realized that she was wrong, however, when Sayori abruptly came to a dead stop and stooped to pick up the object she had just stepped on; namely, her whip.

She reeled her yoyo back in and lashed out at Muru Muru with her recovered main weapon. This, too, bounced off of the imp's barrier. "Hurry up and kill her, Yuno!" Muru Muru shouted, "I can't do it for you; I'm not an Owner!"

"Since when is it a familiar's place to give her master orders?" Sayori demanded, practically spitting her words out as if they were as acidic in her mouth as they sounded.

"Yuno!" Muru Muru shouted again, ignoring Sayori, "Remember your goal! You want to be with Yuri, right? Ya gotta win the Game and start everything over! Next time around, we won't let things go off the rails like this."

"Damn," Sayori hissed when she realized there was no way for her to fight the fiendish familiar without the element of surprise. So she did the only sensible thing, and turned around and ran away.

She didn't make it far before Muru Muru zipped ahead and clotheslined her. "Not so fast, Twelfth!" the imp roared, conjuring a bubble around Sayori and lifting her into the air. "Alright, Second, now to…Second?" Muru Muru asked, noticing just then that the other girl had disappeared. "Second? Yuno? Hey, where'd ya go?!"

"Heh, heh, heh," Sayori laughed weakly. "Guess she couldn't wait any longer…if I were a gambler, I'd put my money on her going after Yuri. And you can't kill me~" Sayori taunted.

Muru Muru scrunched up her face in annoyance. Then she grinned. "No, I can't…but I can at least take you out of play, for a bit…"

Being blind, Sayori could not see what Muru Muru did next, but she could feel the air around her suddenly go still as she was encased in a sphere…

May 2 nd , 12:01 AM:

"Well, it's official. We've beaten the Dead End," Monika announced, checking her Diary every time it updated with a new burst of static. She lead Natsuki, Akise, and Keigo through the alleyways of the city. Orin, along with her hostages Tsubaki and Reisuke, the Fifth, had split off from them and rejoined the Orphans returning to the Mother's Village orphanage. Keigo, as impressed with Natsuki's faith in him as Monika had been, had returned her Protector Diary in exchange for her bat, and was serving as their rearguard. Painkillers long gone from her system, Natsuki's willpower was no longer enough to force her legs and back to comply with her, so she was (*very* reluctantly) riding on Akise's back, focused wholly on her Diary as she silently prayed for it to give her some clue as to where Yuno had taken Yuri, as well as where Sayori might be. Akise also glanced at his Detective Diary every so often, keeping tabs on what the other Owners were up to.

"Akise, what's Yuno up to?" Natsuki asked.

"Who's Yuno, again?"

"The Second."

Akise scrolled up and down his Diary's entries. "She's…driving towards the edge of town, with First in her trunk. That was your friend Yuri, right?"

"Yeah…damn it," Natsuki seethed. "I *might* know where she's taking her. She's going to hide her in an abandoned hotel her parents used to own, out of town."

"Hey, Third. We need a vehicle," said Akise.

"My name is Monika, thank you," said Monika. "And no, we don't need a vehicle right now. I know what we're doing."

"What?! Monika, weren't you listening? Yuri needs our help!" Natsuki insisted.

"Natsuki." Monika stopped walking, lowered her phone, and turned to face Natsuki. "I *know* what we need to do. To save everyone. Please, trust me."

The two women stared at each other for a moment. Then, slowly, Natsuki nodded. "Alright, President. So…what are we doing?"

"Before we can meet up with Yuri, we have to save Sayori," said Monika, turning around and continuing on, "And before that, we have to find a…certain place."

"Hold up, Sayori's in trouble?" Natsuki asked.

"Not for long…this way," said Monika. Soon, they found themselves back on the streets, in a 'night life' area. "There's the place," said Monika, pointing out a nightclub.

"Eh? That's a Yakuza spot," said Keigo.

"Good. I need guns," said Monika.

"Eh?!" Keigo bawked.

"If you don't mind, Chief, I'd appreciate it if you stayed out here with Nat. You too, Akise; you might get in my way. Nat, hold this," said Monika, tossing her Diary at the pinkette.

"Ah!" gasped Natsuki, almost falling off of Akise as she reached out to catch the phone.

"Uh…you realize that you're still mortal, even if your Diary isn't broken?" Keigo asked.

"Oh, of course. But it's a liability in melee," said Monika as she proceeded towards the club.

"Grr…would you at least take my bat?" Natsuki shouted after her.

"If you insist," said Monika, stopping again and holding out her hand. At Natsuki's insistence, Keigo gave up the bat. Monika whistled a jaunty tune as she waltzed right up to the club's doorman, casually *laid him the fuck out* with a two-handed swing across the face, and proceeded into the club.

Nearly half an hour passed, with a good deal of club-goers flooding out, expressing various degrees of panic and bewilderment. Gunfire was also heard, for a while. About five more minutes passed after the gunfire ceased, and then Monika came back out with two large sacks slung over her shoulders. She looked pretty rough around the edges, her hair was messed up, she had a swelling eye, and a thin line of blood coming out of one side of her mouth. She was also *beaming* like the sun. "That was…therapeutic. Sorry, Natsuki, I kind of…broke your bat. I got you these, though," she said as she dropped a sack and fished something out of it. She handed Natsuki a pair of nunchucks.

"Oh, sweet! Chucks!" Natsuki gushed as she accepted the replacement weapon. "Wait, hold on…what else do you have?"

Keigo peeked in a sack, and his eyes widened. "That's a lot of guns…"

"Monika?" Natsuki questioned, looking concerned.

Monika just kept smiling, hefting her sacks of ill-gotten hardware. "Next, we get off the streets and find a place to lay low."

"Hmm. Keigo's got a wife and a kid, I *had* a van…pretty much all the Owners know who you are, so your place is compromised," Natsuki muttered mostly to herself. She spoke up louder, "Our best bet is Akise's house. He lives alone."

"Excuse me?" Akise piped up.

"Oh, don't even. You are *way* too deep in this to start drawing lines now," said Natsuki, grinning impishly.

Akise opened his mouth and raised a finger…then dropped it and sighed, "You're not wrong…my place it is, then."

…

May 2 nd , 1:13 AM, at Akise's house:

Keigo stared at Monika in open-mouthed shock. He would have fallen on his ass if he hadn't already been seated. Akise was just as taken aback, just not visibly so. Natsuki just sighed and shook her head.

"That's Mony, for ya," the tsundere remarked, "She's either the Sane One, or she's the Craziest Of Them All. There's just no in-between with her."

Monika raised an eyebrow at her. "Not going to try talking sense into me?"

Natsuki snorted. "Why? Even at your craziest, you're never *irrational* . You wouldn't even think of something like this if you didn't have a

good reason to think it was doable."

Keigo, having finally regained his powers of speech, asked, "You're actually serious about this?"

"You don't know me very well, Chief, but ask any of my friends and they'll tell you that this is *exactly* what I do when I want something," said Monika, "Namely, I break the game and rewrite the script."

"Can confirm," Natsuki said with a nod, "Pen in her hand, she writes her own rules to play by."

"Quite," Monika agreed. "Now, who's willing to help me? Keigo, if my plan works out, my first act as the new God of this world will be to save your son."

"My son?" Keigo asked, confused. "What are you –"

"He's dying," said Natsuki bluntly. "His illness is way too advanced for modern medicine to cure. His only hope for survival is a literal miracle."

Keigo's eyes widened. "How…how could you–"

"Because we're time travelers from another world!" Natsuki snapped, "Does it matter what we know or how we know it? But it's true, either way."

"To be clear," said Monika, "I fully intend to give him his miracle even if you oppose me. But your aid will make it easier for me to get there."

"There's a critical flaw in your plan," Akise spoke up. "Your plan is predicated on a necessity for haste. Specifically because of peril to your friend, Tw–"

" *Sayori* ," Monika and Natsuki both said, glaring at him.

"…your friend Sayori's life," Akise amended. "And while I'm willing to believe that you can pull this off, having seen how headstrong and cunning Nin–Natsuki is, and that she is willing to defer to you. You must, therefore, be quite the capable individual."

"I'm not easily stopped when I have a goal in my sights, to be sure," Monika admitted.

"But how will you deal with the Eleventh? With Mayor Bacchus, that is? His Diary reads everyone else's, including mine and yours. My Diary, which can also read other Diaries and anticipate their Owners' reactions, can at best counter his, but not beat it; and he has more resources at his command, and being a man of such importance as he is, he is already well-protected even without having advanced warning. Which he will, the moment any of us take action against him. While even this is not necessarily an insurmountable obstacle, it is one that will require time and resources to overcome. Neither of which you have."

"I have this," replied Monika, handing over her Diary to Akise.

The kid detective started reading it, and soon frowned. "What is this? I don't understand…it's all gibberish."

"Not at all," replied Monika, taking her Diary back. "Think of it in terms of rock-paper-scissors. Every Diary works differently, and some of those distinct methodologies will naturally provide their Owners with advantages and disadvantages against one another. At first glance, the Eleventh's Diary seems to effectively counter any other Diary…except it, too, has a fatal flaw. Unlike your Diary, it doesn't tell him what we're doing…it only tells him what's on our Diaries. My Diary exploits this weakness by giving me it's guidance in the form of poetic expressions that only make sense to me…or anyone who has great familiarity with my writing style. My Diary, much like myself, exists with the purpose of defying fate itself. So long as I go after Bacchus by myself, the only thing his Watcher will give him is poetry he won't know the meaning of. Can the three of you gather the others?"

"I think we can manage," replied Natsuki, pushing herself up off Akise's sofa. Her face paled and she winced, even wobbled a bit, but she stayed upright.

Monika frowned. "You *can* sit this out…"

"Nope. Gonna ride this pain train all the way to the station," Natsuki grunted. "Until all four of us are in the same place, at the same time, and *safe* . Then, and only then, I will happily pass the hell out and let everyone baby me, or whatever."

"If you insist," Monika sighed, "I'll join you, with his Mayorship in tow, at Mother's Village. Natsuki, be sure to keep me posted if your Diary says anything new about Sayori or Yuri, okay?"

"Right," Natsuki nodded. "And you…just be careful, okay?"

"Insofar as I can afford to be, I will," Monika promised gravely as she started out of the room. Then she stopped and looked back, "Actually, Chief Inspector Kurusu, there is one more small thing you could help me with…if you wouldn't mind."

…

May 2 nd , 1:40 AM, on the highway outside of Sakurami City:

Yuri regained consciousness. She was in a small, cramped space. Judging by the sounds around her, and the scent of gasoline and exhaust fumes, she concluded that she was in the trunk of a car. She quickly patted herself down and groped around in the dark, and concluded that neither her Diary nor any of her weapons were with her. She sighed, aggravated. *'Odds are, Yuno had me again. I'm getting very sick of this crap. Still, it would seem she's shifted her goal back from killing me to preserving me. That, at least, gives me a chance. Now, how to get out?'*

She went back to groping around in the dark. Her hand fell on something hard, and after s little more groping she determined it to

be a tire iron. The kind with one socket on one end and a wedge for prying on the other end. Yuri had an idea, and even though she knew it was a stupidly risky idea she would be lying if she said it didn't excite her a little. Gripping the iron tightly with both hands, and trying not to tremble, she placed the wedged end against her stomach, just above her navel. *'It has to be at least potentially life-threatening, or she has no reason to care,'* Yuri told herself. "The hard part," she muttered aloud, "Will be not going too deeply…"

Without further hesitation, she thrust the wedge into her flesh. She artfully avoided damaging her stomach, pancreas, and liver. She bit deeply into her lower lip to stifle a moan. It was agony, but it was also ecstasy. She resisted the urge to push it further in, and in fact quickly pulled the iron out just before, as she had anticipated, the car came to a screaming halt. Yuri heard other cars shriek and swerve. She heard a door open and slam, hurried footsteps, a jangle of keys fumbling in worried fingers, scraping against the lid of the trunk before finally slotting in–

Yuri tightened her grip on the tire iron.

–twisting–

Yuri tensed her legs.

–and finally the lid of the trunk sprang up, Yuno's distressed face appearing. "Yuri! Why would you–?!"

Yuri sprang out like a snake, appropriately baring her teeth, and smashed the iron into Yuno's jaw. Yuno staggered backwards, and Yuri struck her three more times in quick succession until she crumpled. Yuri dropped her weapon and crouched down, quickly frisking Yuno, who was still conscious but dazed. Yuri found her Diary in one of Yuno's pockets, then picked up the keys Yuno had dropped as well as Yuno's own Diary, which she had also been holding. *'She can't track me without this. Not easily, at least.'*

"Yuri…why?" Yuno groaned, still staring blankly at the night sky. She looked so pitiful that Yuri hesitated.

"…honestly? It's not even personal. I know how it feels to fall psychotically in love with someone, believe it or not," said Yuri, "But my friends need me. I don't have time to play games with you, Gasai-san. Goodbye."

Yuri got in the car and drove off, leaving Yuno where she lay.

…

May 2 nd , 12:30 PM, City Hall:

The hard part, Monika reflected, had been getting enough of the right kind of ammunition. The rubber kind, of course. Natsuki had managed to hook her up with a bunch of concussion grenades, and it so happened she already owned a pair of noise-cancelling ear-protectors. Despite preferring to kill with a machete, her Unawake self had also enjoyed practicing marksmanship. Also fortunately, Unawake-Monika had kept a spare of her bullet-proof, explosives-resistant, gas-mask equipped outfit.

With a little handiwork, she was able to add plenty of holsters for her newly acquired firearms to the inside and outside of the jacket. Still, the tricky part had been getting her hands on enough rubber bullets. Obviously, it would have been easier to use the normal bullets she had gotten at the Yakuza club, but for what she had in mind it would be infeasible to maintain a zero-lethality rating.

Just because her friends were in peril was no excuse, in Monika's opinion, to forsake her standards. Gunning down Agents in the Matrix, as well as other soulless mooks, was one things. But Monika wasn't about to prioritize her own convenience over the lives of actual human beings.

Kurosaki Ryuji, secretary to Mayor John Bacchus, didn't know any of this, however. So he was understandably close to pissing himself as

he slammed the door to his boss's office shut behind him. "S-Sir!" he gasped, clutching at his chest, "She's…she's tearing through the security!"

"Damn it," Mayor Bacchus gnashed his teeth, "How did my Watcher not warn me about this?!"

Both men jumped when the heard another concussion grenade go off in the distance, followed by the staccato of automatic gunfire, and the sound of men screaming in pain and hitting the floor.

"Your Diary isn't telling you *anything* ?" asked Ryuji, trying to swallow his mounting panic.

"Nothing but flowery, metaphorical gibberish!" John growled, "Third's Diary isn't working at all like it was at the beginning of the Game!"

Ryuji consulted his own Apprentice Diary, the "Secretary" Diary, which told him John's future. "My Diary doesn't yield anything helpful, either."

"DAMN IT!" roared the mayor, kicking a chair over.

After a moment, the two realized that it was quiet outside. Then they heard a new sound. A sound easily more chilling than the earlier cacophony. The steady sound of heavy footfalls, slowly but surely drawing closer and closer.

Then Monika, masked and covered by her heavy jacket, kicked in the door, an SMG in each hand. Ryuji finally lost control of his bladder, and then passed out on the spot.

John Bacchus was just as frightened, but he maintained his composure. Still, his throat was too dry for him to talk.

"Alright, Eleventh," said Monika, her voice sounding sinister through her mask, "You might not believe me, but I have no intention of killing

you. Still, I need to capture you. Alive, I promise you. In fact, check your Diary. There shouldn't be a Dead End in there."

After a moment's hesitation, John did so. "…you're right, there is no Dead End…then what was the point of all this?"

"The long and short of it? I have a plan to win the Game without anyone having to die," said Monika. "For it to work, I need to capture all of the Diary Owners."

"I see," said John. "And just how do you plan to get me out of here? It will be much more difficult than just killing me and trying to escape on your own."

"Oh, don't you worry, Your Mayorship," said Monika said smugly, smiling behind her mask, "I have planned this out most thoroughly." Then she dropped her guns and ran forward, clearing the distance in two long strides and punching him in the stomach hard enough to lift him off of his feet. The Eleventh's eyes rolled back as he lost consciousness, slumping over Monika's arm. She laid him down on the floor and hurried over to his computer. In her head, she was counting the seconds; by her reckoning, she had less than two minutes to work her magic. She started by plugging a flash drive into the computer and opening a program she had written back at Akise's place.

It would literally be as easy as breathing, if she were *inside* the system. Working through manual proxies like a normal person made it…not necessarily harder, but definitely much more tedious and time-consuming. Still, it took her less than a minute to hack into City Hall's security network and reset the whole thing. Cameras (including the one in the office) went down, and digital footage was wiped. There would be hard copies, of course, specifically for situations like this, but by the time the police looked through those Monika would be long gone. The last thing she did on the computer was activate her homemade program, which would repeatedly crash attempts to reinitialize the cameras.

Next, she quickly took off her jacket, gas-mask, and wide-brimmed hat. She stuffed the apparel under the mayor's desk. Under her vestments she had been wearing a policewoman's uniform. Complete with a police radio, which she had a pair of earbuds plugged into, which had been keeping her informed of their activities. Which was how she knew her next step would work, if she could get to the roof unseen.

' *Almost out of time,'* she thought, stifling a surge of panic. She grabbed John and slung him over her shoulders, fireman-style. Then she departed the office and consulted her Diary before picking her direction. On the way, she quickly tapped out a message and texted it to Keigo, and hoped he could carry out his end.

…

Several minutes later, on the roof of City Hall:

Monika kicked open the roof access door and ran out. She was sweating profusely by now, but she was close to success. The helicopter was still there, having received orders to stand-by and receive the mayor himself for evacuation after it had deposited an anti-firearms squad, which was presently working their way down through the building. And it was an MBB/Kawasaki BK 117, which meant there was only one pilot; one less complication to worry about. Monika hot-legged it to the chopper and jumped inside, quickly depositing the mayor in a seat and deftly harnessing him up. As she did so, she yelled to the pilot, "C'mon, let's go! We need to get him to a hospital!"

As the pilot lifted the chopper off of the rooftop, he asked, "Has he been injured?"

"Gunshot in the shoulder!" Monika lied, "But he's not in any immediate danger of bleeding out." Instead of harnessing herself into a seat, however, she drew out her phone and typed a message on the screen. Then she moved up to the pilot, put the phone in front of his face, and shoved her gun under his chin. She didn't know for

sure whether or not Japanese police helicopters were audio-monitored, but she figured it was safer not to risk it. "Any problems, sir?" she asked, give him her most scary-sweet smile. She was simultaneously proud and ashamed at the shiver the pilot tried not to show as he shook his head. *'It's no real surprise…I am a monster, after all,'* she reflected, *'But I'm a monster on a righteous mission. If being monstrous can serve a higher purpose, do I have any right to reject that part of me?'*

At Monika's direction, the pilot landed in a specific, mostly vacant parking lot. "Alright, help me get the mayor out," she ordered in a friendly tone. The pilot unbuckled himself, unbuckled the mayor, and carried him out of the helicopter. At Monika's direction, the pilot laid the mayor down on the pavement, then removed his helmet. Monika then viciously slammed the butt of her revolver into the base of his skull, knocking him out cold. She holstered the gun, put the pilot back inside the helicopter, picked up the mayor, and walked towards the street.

"I love it when a plan comes together," she said to herself as a police car pulled up to the curb. She deposited the mayor in the backseat, where she noticed an older man was already seated and handcuffed. Then she got in the front passenger seat. " *Ohayou* , Chief Inspector~" she merrily greeted Keigo, saluting him.

"Hiyama-san," he rejoined with an amused smirk. "Even if it makes me a stain on the honor of Japanese law enforcement…I have to admit, I admire your audacity. You're pretty resourceful, too."

"Please, Keigo-san…you're not flattering me at all, trust me," said Monika, eyes falling towards her lap. "I assure you, I take no pride in my capacity to be devious. The only thing I *want* to apply myself to is keeping my friends safe and happy. And if that occasionally requires me to engage in…in *skullduggery* such as this…well, "necessary evils" and all that. But that doesn't mean I should enjoy it."

"Fair enough, I suppose," the policeman agreed.

"Surely you don't *enjoy* breaking the laws you've sworn to uphold, even if it's necessary to save your son's life?" asked Monika somewhat frankly.

"I guess I can't say that it does," he admitted, "But I'm not one to do things by halves, either. Whether I have to become a God or a Devil, if it's to save my boy, I'll go as far as I have to. Without looking back."

"Can't argue with you there," Monika conceded. "So, that's Tenth in the back?"

"Mhmm."

"Then all that's left is to meet everyone else at Mother's Village," said Monika.

…

1:48 PM, Mother's Village:

No sooner had Monika shoved John Bacchus–hands bound behind his back, mouth gagged, and once again conscious and walking under his own power–through the doors to the orphanage, then the mayor found himself shoved aside and Monika found herself in the death-grip embrace of a tall, trembling girl with a mane of purple hair.

"Hey…Yuri," Monika gasped, patting her friend on the back, "Good… to see…you…too…hah…my lungs…"

Yuri let go of Monika and stepped backwards, blushing, but also smiling hugely. It was a very unusually open expression for Yuri to have, which was just as well, because words seemed to be beyond her at the moment. "Where's Natsuki?" Monika wheezed, rubbing her tender ribs.

"Passed out on the sofa," remarked another pretty young woman with long hair, entering the room with a pompadour-ed young man at her side. The woman, Ai, had a weary expression; her boyfriend,

Marco, looked downright hostile. They were, together, the Seventh Future Diary Owners, and the eldest of Eighth's numerous wards.

"Passed out? What happened to all her talk about riding things out to the end, I wonder?" asked Monika, looking genuinely shocked. Natsuki, for all her tsundere-ish double-speak, wasn't generally one to act contrary to what she said she was going to do.

"Ehehe," Yuri giggled, raising a hand and wriggling her fingers, "She held out for about five seconds, after I got my hands on her."

Monika, Ai, Marco, the mayor, Keigo and Tenth, who had just walked in behind Monika, and Orin, who happened to be passing by with a basket of laundry just then, all stared at Yuri and raised an eyebrow or two apiece. Yuri's blush deepened, and her expression changed from ecstatic to embarrassed. "Ah! I, I-I m-m-meant, I-I-I-I…"

"She held Ninth down and gave her a shoulder rub," Orin explained, deciding to play angel of mercy. "Ninth fell asleep pretty much right after she stopped struggling."

Ai smiled in spite of herself, "It was pretty adorable, to be honest."

"Hmph," remarked Marco, "I don't know what the Director's thinking, letting all of our enemies into our home like this…nothing good can come of this."

"Your prudence is wise, but none of us are your enemies," said Akise, coming in from outside with a basket full of vegetables. Kamado, the Eighth, was right behind him with two small children riding her shoulders, and a third perched on her poofy hat. "So, it would seem we've gathered all of the Owners. All but Second and Tw–ahem, Sayori."

"Ai-chan, Marco-kun, would you mind taking these two gentlemen downstairs with our other reluctant guests?" Kamado asked.

Both halves of the Seventh nodded their affirmative and grabbed the Tenth and Eleventh by their arms, leading them out of the room.

"Well, we have Yuri, so Yuno's sure to turn up sooner than later," said Monika after she, Yuri, Keigo, Kamado, and Akise had taken seats around a table in the kitchen, "And seeing as Natsuki's Diary predicts Sayori dying at Yuno's hand, it's likely Yuno knows where she is."

"But…forgive my bluntness, Monika," Akise spoke up, "But if Yuno has Sayori, and means to kill her, then–"

"Why hasn't she, yet?" Monika finished for her, "I can only assume she's laser-focused on *you* right now. Which, disconcerting though it may be, works to our advantage. The more desperate she is to get you, the sooner she'll come to us. And the worse her tunnel vision is, the easier it will be to trap her."

"And then what? What's our plan, Madam President?" asked Yuri, putting on her serious face.

"When you called me, you mentioned that you took her Diary, right?" Monika asked.

Yuri nodded.

"Damn, I was hoping that *wasn't* the case," Monika muttered to everyone's surprise.

"But without her Yuri Diary, the only way the Second can find her here is for us to let her know where she is," Akise pointed out, "Which gives us control over her information of the situation."

"Exactly," said Monika. "Yuno will realize this, too. She'll be cautious and on her guard. She will thus be much harder to trick than if she were coming here on her own information, thinking that she was taking us by surprise. The element of surprise is an invaluable asset in tactical planning; we're at something of a handicap without it."

"Are you sure you aren't overestimating your opponent here?" asked Keigo, "She's a fourteen-year-old girl. She's not exactly Sun Tzu."

Monika rubbed both sides of her nose with her index fingers, inhaling and exhaling deeply. "Yuri?"

"Coffee?"

"Coffee. Please."

Yuri nodded and left the table.

"With all due respect, Kurusu-san, I've *read* Sun Tzu," said Monika, "I've also read Laozi, who said "There is no greater danger than underestimating your opponent". But Laozi was a philosopher. Sun Tzu was a general, and he said, "The victorious warrior secures victory before going to war; the defeated warrior goes to war seeking victory". I've seen Gasai Yuno in action. I don't doubt that I can take her, but I have no intention of selling her short. What I *do* intend is to beat her before I engage her, if I can help it. Thank you, Yuri," said Monika as she accepted a cup of coffee from her friend. A faint note of cinnamon delighted Monika's nose as she sipped the bitter, reinvigorating brew. Yuri also handed out cups of coffee to the others at the table, who all thanked her as well. "With all of the other Owners either part of this alliance, or in our custody, Yuno represents the only significant obstacle in our path," Monika concluded.

"You mean *your* path, don't you?" asked Marco as he and Ai entered the kitchen.

Monika sighed. "Someone has to inherit the throne of Deus. Honestly, I'd rather it be almost *anyone* but me. But, this is my hare-brained scheme, so the consequences are my responsibility. I'm sure I can't convince you of my sincerity or trustworthiness, but–"

"Monika," Yuri interjected, "Just be honest with them."

Akise raised an eyebrow as Monika blushed faintly. Everyone looked at her intently. Keigo propped his chin in his hand. "What's she talkin' about, Hiyama-san?" he asked.

Monika sighed heavily. "Alright, fine…I'm a misotheist."

Everyone was silent for a moment. "A miss-what?" asked Ai.

"A misotheist is someone who hates God," said Akise.

"*Yawn* Y'all talkin' 'bout Mony's whole "God is a dick" complex?" asked Natsuki as she, too, staggered into the room. She was leaning on a cane that Ai had given her. When Natsuki had tried to refuse it, Ai had threatened to…well, suffice it to say she had convinced Natsuki to swallow her pride and accept the damn cane.

"Yes," replied Yuri, smiling at Natsuki.

"I smell coffee," Natsuki realized, "Oh, yesssssss." She hobbled off towards the coffeepot.

"So, you hate God?" asked Kamado.

"I wouldn't say I entirely *hate* Him, especially seeing as I'm unconvinced of His existence. Let's just say that *if* He's real? He has a *lot* to answer for," said Monika, hints of cold steel creeping into her voice. "Now, whatever he is exactly, Deus isn't the God I have it out for, mind you," Monika explained, "But he's close enough that this gives me an opportunity to blow off some steam, as it were."

Marco narrowed his eyes, "That's kind of selfish, isn't it?"

"Perhaps," Monika admitted, "But I have my right to be selfish, just as everyone else does. Anyways, I deserve to be at least a little selfish. I'm trying to save everyone in the Game, after all."

Ai looked at Marco, who sighed. His expression softened, just a bit. "I suppose…and we all know that our beloved Director would rather the Game ended without anyone dying."

"I'm glad we can agree, at the very least, that resolving the Game without anyone having to die is the best way to go," said Monika.

Three bursts of static; one from Natsuki's phone, one from Monika's, and one from Akise's. The three of them checked their Diaries. "Shit!" Natsuki gasped, blanching, "Sayori's Dead End has moved up to this afternoon!"

"Yuno seems to have wised up," Akise added, "And realized she has a hostage. Her intention is to draw you three out of hiding."

"Very well," said Monika gravely as she put down her coffee and stood up. "In that case…we have to engage her on her terms. That puts us at a distinct disadvantage, but at this point we have little choice but to play the hand dealt to us. Let's go, Yuri."

"You're not leaving me here, are you?" Natsuki asked, her tone challenging.

"Yes," said Monika bluntly. "You're body's taken a lot of abuse. That one leg alone…no, you can stay here and keep an eye on things."

"Yuri's hurt too!" shouted Natsuki, slamming down her cane for emphasis. "She's got a *hole* in her gut!"

"It's been properly cleaned, sutured, and bandaged," Yuri refuted, "And you should know by now that…that pain doesn't impede my movements." In spite of herself, Yuri was blushing faintly.

"I'll go with them in your place, Natsuki," Akise offered, standing up as well. "Surely by now you can trust me that much?"

"You can tag along if you want," Natsuki growled, "But I'm *not* staying behind for anything. And if you try to leave me behind, Monika, I swear to God I'll knock you around until you don't know which way is up!"

Monika folded her arms and coolly stared back into Natsuki's fiery glare. It didn't take long for Natsuki to seemingly shrink in on herself and look away. "Look…I'll stay out of the fight, if you insist…but just, please, don't make me stay behind, Monika. I'm just as worried about Sayori as you two are. I can't just sit here and do nothing while you save her!"

Monika sighed, again. "Very well. I can see you won't be deterred… get ready, then. Everyone that's coming, meet me outside in ten minutes."

…

2:49 PM, Gasai Yuno's house:

Yuno was lying down in her room, in the dark, waiting. Well, not entirely in the dark. Her face was lit up by the cell phone in her hand. The last entry in the phone read,

[2:50 PM – Amano and her allies show up to save Twelfth. Why is she trying so hard to protect her enemies?!]

"Murmur," said Yuno out loud, seemingly addressing the room that was empty, save for herself.

The air rippled, and through a small tear in space-time Murumuru appeared. "Yeah, Boss?"

"Are we ready for them?" Yuno asked.

"Yeah, should be…I've done everything I can to fudge the data being sent to their Future Diaries," replied the familiar, "But I won't get away with any more than what I've done. Deus is pretty suspicious of me by now. I'm not even sure if it's safe for me to go back to the Causality Cathedral."

"Don't worry, Murmur," said Yuno as she got up from her futon. "The Game will end soon. And then, we can start everything over."

Yuno picked up an axe and a knife off of her floor and left her room, Murumuru drifting through the air behind her. She moved to the front of the house, just as someone kicked her door in; Monika and Akise, the door-kickers, quickly backed away as Natsuki tossed in a flashbang. Yuno ran forward, caught it, and tossed it over her shoulder to Murumuru, who created an opaque magic barrier around it just in time. Monika ran into the house, drawing two guns from underarm holsters concealed by the jacket she was wearing. She opened fire on Yuno, shooting at her with stun rounds.

Yuno stood still, smiling smugly as the non-lethal rounds bounced harmlessly off of an invisible barrier in front of her. "Damn it! Yuri, Akise, get in here and shut down this bothersome imp!" Monika ordered, holstering her guns and throwing herself at Yuno. Yuno met her advance, swinging both of her weapons. Monika spun around behind Yuno's back and punched her in the back of the neck. Yuno grunted, but didn't even stagger. She ripped through the air behind her with her axe, moving faster than Monika could keep pace with and missing her mark by mere millimeters as Monika quickly stepped backwards. Yuno took another swing, overhead this time, but Monika caught the axe right under the blade. Without taking her eyes off of Yuno's, Monika caught her knife hand by the wrist, and then slammed her forehead into Yuno's. Then she did it again, and again, and *again* . The last one was punctuated by a scream of pain and rage. Yuno tried to backpedal, but Monika wouldn't let her go; blood trickled down from her forehead, but she smiled.

"I bet you think you know what crazy is, don't you, Gasai?" Monika asked sweetly. "Well, I'm pretty knowledgeable on the subject myself. Let's compare notes, shall we?"

Yuno's eyes widened a bit, and she started struggling harder against Monika's iron grip. Monika backed up, pulling Yuno with her, and swung her into a wall. In so doing, she finally released her. Yuno bounced off of the wall and charged Monika again, screaming throatily. Out of her periphery, Monika noticed a knife-wielding Yuri and a baton-wielding Akise chasing Murumuru around the room.

She refocused on Yuno and lunged forward, ducking under the axe and taking the knife in her arm. Hissing sharply in pain, she nevertheless tackled Yuno, wrapping her arms around the girl's midsection. They both hit the floor. Monika yanked the knife out of her arm, and with her fingers wrapped around the knife she punched Yuno in the face. "WHERE'S SAYORI?!" she screamed, punching her again. Two of her fingers ached so horribly that she suspected she had broken them, but in the heat of the moment it seemed like a minor distraction at worst.

Yuno screamed back at her and swung her axe at Monika's head. Monika caught the axe, yanked it out of her hand, and slammed the butt of it in Yuno's face. "Where is Sayori?" she repeated, her voice somewhat more controlled.

Monika whipped her head around when she saw a flash of light, and then a ball of energy knocked her off of Yuno.

"Murmur," Yuno groaned as she sat up, "Release–"

Then a car plowed into the house, forcing Murumuru to shoot up into the air to avoid getting hit.

"How about NO, ya crazy bitch," said Natsuki, getting out of the car. "I didn't hit anyone I care about, right?"

"We're fine," replied Yuri, who had pressed herself against a wall. Next to her, Akise was too shocked to immediately reply.

"Cool beans," said Natsuki, pulling her nunchucks out of her pocket and limping over to Yuno, who was back on her feet now.

"Are Kool-Aid Man entrances going to become a thing with you, now?" asked Monika, grabbing the axe and flinging it at Murumuru, who dove to avoid it. As soon as she did, Monika leaped and tackled her out of the air. "DOGPILE!" she called out, then grunted a moment later as Yuri and Akise threw themselves on top of her.

"Alright, Crazy In Pink, just you and me," Natsuki said with relish, "I'm not dumb enough to waste time trying to reason with you, though. I'm just gonna knock your ass out."

"We need to know where she's keeping Sayori," Monika reminded her. "Damn!" she exclaimed when Murumuru stopped struggling and teleported out from under them. "It is so damned annoying, having to fight magic without magic.

"Murmur…release your seals!" Yuno ordered, jumping to the side when Natsuki lunged at her.

The heavy bracelets on Murumuru's wrists cracked and crumbled away. Her eyes widened and turned dark red, while her pupils narrowed into hellish slits. Her mouth grew into an immense, grotesque grin, and with a piercing cackle of murderous glee she shoot towards Natsuki.

Then time stopped.

Part 8, The Finale

…

…

…

"…what?" asked Natsuki.

She couldn't see anything. She didn't *feel* anything. And she couldn't hear, either; not even her own voice.

Yuno, Monika, Yuri, and Akise were all having the same strange experiences, though they had no way of communicating the fact to one another. Then their senses came back to them, and they were all standing in the Cathedral of Causality. Keigo, Marco, Ai, and Kamado were there as well. As were Reisuke, Tsubaki, the man known as Tenth, and John Bacchus, all of whom were tied up. The

only Future Diary Owner missing was Sayori. Floating above Deus's head and pounding savagely, yet impotently, against the inside of the see-through box she was trapped in, was Murumuru.

" **This Game has gotten wildly out of hand,** " said Deus X. Machina, the God of Time and Space. " **Would anyone care to explain what is going on? Muru Muru, why are you taking orders from a mortal? Where is The Twelfth Future Diary Owner, and why is she beyond my senses? If no one has any answers, I shall erase everyone here from existence and start the Game over with a different group.** " He said this looking directly at Yuno.

She bowed her head and clenched her fists. Then she raised one hand and snapped her fingers. A large ball appeared above her. Deus stretched out one of his long, skinny arms, and tapped the top of the ball with a single finger. Immediately, the ball shattered. Out of it fell two figures; Sayori, looking bewildered, and…

" **Muru Muru?** " asked Deus, staring at the copy of his familiar, bound in chains.

Sayori sat up and blinked, turning her head this way and that. "Well. That was…a trip…ah, I can explain everything, Lord Deus," said Sayori, standing up and dusting herself off.

" **Can you, now? That would be most appreciated.** " Deus leaned back in his Throne and folded his hands, waiting.

"For starters, this Gasai Yuno and that Murumuru you have in that box up there? They're not from this timeline. They're from another timeline where Yuno and Yuki–ah, that is, where Yuno and *Yuri* were the last two standing in the Survival Game. They had fallen in love with each other by then, however, so they agreed to a lovers' suicide. Yuno didn't follow through, however; she intended to win the Game and succeed you, and then use her new powers to bring Yuri back to life. Can you guess what happened next, Lord Deus?"

Deus nodded. " **The Gasai Yuno of this…First World…leaped back in time to repeat the Game. As the successor to the First World's version of myself, that world's Muru Muru would have naturally became *her* servant, and followed her. She replaced this Second World's Muru Muru, entrapping her in that sphere. This explains why, upon being selected for the Game, the Second approached me with a question as to whether or not there was any way to bring back those who died in this Game.** "

"Yep," said Sayori, nodding. "The First World Yuno murdered and took the place of the Second World Yuno, acquiring her phone that you turned into a Future Diary. Along with her own, this meant she had *two* Future Diaries. So, sorry, Yuri, but swiping her phone didn't do you any good."

"How did you know I did that?" asked Yuri.

Sayori pulled out a tape recorder. "My Diary tells me what my friends are doing, which has allowed me to keep tabs on you three without getting myself on anyone else's radar…sorry if that sounds creepy, or anything, but–"

"Nah," said Natsuki, "A Future Diary that tells you about your friends instead of your own future? That makes perfect sense for you. Also, have you read the manga, too?"

"Close. I watched the anime," said Sayori.

"Well, you must have actually finished it, because this is *all* news to me!" said Natsuki, "I mean, this Yuno is from *another timeline* ? And she murdered herself?! I knew she was nuts but…actually, that explains a lot…" Natsuki trailed off thoughtfully.

"You should always finish what you start, Nat," said Sayori reproachfully, "Especially when it's fiction from the Hub. Because it's only a matter of time before you wind up in that Branch. Why *didn't* you finish it, anyways? You're not usually a quitter."

"Ugh, I checked out after Akise died," said Natsuki, folding her arms sulkily.

"I *what* ?" asked Akise from right next to her.

" **What are you two talking about?** " asked Deus.

"Oh, right, that," said Sayori, "See, there's another complication in all of this. Very, very long story short…ish…this entire universe, including the previous timeline and possibly the next one, if that still winds up happening, are all just one Branch on a hypercosmically massive Tree that is also a reality-controlling Supercomputer. It's called Yggdrasil. And it's broken, so the Admins, which are gods like you, but *way* more powerful because they operate on Yggdrasil's level, whereas you're confined to just one of Yggdrasil's countless Branches…sorry…anyways, the Admins put all the various universes into time loops to preserve them. Letting them continue as they should have would damage Yggdrasil further, but just freezing them would cause sterilization–"

"Stagnation," Yuri corrected.

"Yeah, that. Wait, how would freezing time make Stag Nations?" asked Sayori.

" *The point being* ," Monika interjected, "Every universe that there is, is currently experiencing repeating time loops until the Admins can fix Yggdrasil. A process that has already taken more than trillions of years and may still take incomprehensibly longer. A handful of individuals across the Multiverse were chosen to be able to remember the Loops. We're called Loopers. The first Looper in any universe is its Anchor. The Anchor's mental stability is integral to the continued stability of their universe, but being stuck in a time loop is bad for someone's sanity. Especially when no one else remembers; after a while, non-Loopers start to look a lot like non-autonomous puppets just acting on a script. In other words, like not-people. Which is *bad* . So to keep the Anchor stable, the people closest to them eventually become Loopers as well. And to keep the Loopers from

getting too bored, Yggdrasil sometimes puts them in *other* Loops. But every Loop requires an Anchor. At least one."

"Which brings us to the answer to your original question," spoke up Yuri, "Of how the Game has gotten so completely derailed. Monika, Natsuki, Sayori, and I are all Loopers from another universe. Monika is our Anchor. Also, there's a world we call "the Hub" where every other universe is recorded in the form of fiction. This is because the Hub is so stable that the Admins use it as a data backup for Yggdrasil. Thanks to these backups, Natsuki and Sayori already knew everything that was supposed to happen in this loop. And we're all good friends, obviously, so we have no intention of killing each other to win the Game. And, frankly, none of us want to kill anyone else, either, if we can help it. And besides that, Monika is Anchoring this loop. So if anyone kills her, the loop crashes. Which means *everything* ends and everyone dies."

"So, basically, what happens if you die and no one can take your place, Lord Deus," Sayori summarized.

"And loop crashes are usually answered with the involved Loopers being put through some kind of hellish punishment world, like… *Eiken* …" added Natsuki. All four Loopers shivered at the name.

"So, either you're all the exact same kind of crazy, or Hiyama-san was telling the truth," remarked Keigo.

" **I see. Assuming this is all true, of course. Yet no equally or more probable alternative is forthcoming, nor any other explanation for how you could know about this "First World" timeline that this Gasai Yuno has come from, which must also be true as there is no other possible way there could be two Muru Murus, with one of them being loyal to the Second. And if everything else you have said is true, then the Third cannot be included in the Game, if her death would indeed obliterate this reality,** " said Deus thoughtfully. " **Then it is settled. Hiyama Monika shall be removed from the Survival Game. For her**

crimes, the Gasai Yuno of the First World and her Muru Muru shall be erased from existence, and– "

"NO!" shouted Sayori, "You can't punish Yuno for what she did! She did it because she was in love!"

Monika and Natsuki groaned in stereo. Even Yuri exhaled a bit heavily. "Sayori, you can't pardon the things she's done *just* because–" Monika began.

"What would any of you have done in her place?" Sayori challenged. "If you met that *one* person that you were meant to be with, the one person who made you care in a world that only wanted to beat you down…and the world insisted on keeping you apart! Natsuki! What would you do in a world where you had to choose between your life and Yuri's, and there wasn't any third option?"

"What does that–what are you–don't say stupid things like that, Sayori!" Natsuki yelled, red in the face.

"Hypotheticals aside," said Yuri, pretending that she wasn't also blushing a little, "The reality is that she would selfishly doom entire timelines to oblivion, only to repeat the same mistake over and over again. She's just too crazy to understand what it really means to love someone properly. Although, mind you, I'm not much for the thought of capital punishment, either…perhaps, Lord Deus could merely remove her from the Game like Monika?"

Deus shook his head. " **She has no place in this reality. Her very existence endangers causality. And having proven her unworthiness with her actions, I will not allow her to take my place in this world–** "

"But you'll allow a common serial murderer a shot at godhood?" Monika snapped. "Or a terrorist bomber? Just what twisted standards *are* you operating by, you bastard?"

Silence reigned in the Cathedral. *Everyone* stared at Monika. Slowly, Deus turned his gaze upon her as well. "Before you ask," Monika said calmly, "Yes. Yes, I *am* questioning the alleged wisdom of 'God'. From what I've seen, the only people in this room actually worthy of your position–and yes, I'm including you yourself in that–would be Kamado, Keigo, or Sayori."

"EH?! Wh-what are you s-saying, Monika?" stammered Sayori, blushing furiously. "Me?! C'mon, I can barely manage *myself* ! How would I handle being God?! Even if it's just for the rest of this loop…"

"Because you *give a shit* ," said Monika, "Which would appear to be more than can be said about this creep," she jabbed a condemning finger at Deus. "I'm just saying, if it were me, a fucking Game of Death would be the absolute last method I would even consider for choosing my successor. If I ever permitted the thought to cross my mind in the first place. I don't deny that I can be a monster as well, but at least I'm not so monstrous as to make other people kill each other for a prize."

"It's…it's okay," spoke up Yuno, who had been crying in almost silence. "He's right…I've been horribly selfish. I deserve to be erased…then I can't hurt Yuri anymore…"

"Stop whining over me like that," said Yuri, "It's disgusting."

"Yuri! Don't be mean!" snapped Sayori.

"She's infuriatingly co-dependent!" said Yuri.

"Then she should fit right in with us!" Sayori retorted, "Or have you forgotten the effect *he* had on us?"

"Don't bring Hiroaka into this!" said Yuri, "And besides, that's a poor comparison. Our Baseline is an in-universe dating sim! We were all *designed* to be that way. And we've all long since gotten over it. She has no such excuse."

"Yuri hates me…" Yuno sobbed miserably.

This time, it was Natsuki who snapped, "Oh, grow a friggin' spine already! Look, when a *normal* person gets called out like that, they're not supposed to just fold up like that. You get in their face and start chewing them out! Just because you're in love with her doesn't mean you take crap like that lying down!"

"Are…are you advising her to get in a fight with me?" Yuri asked, raising an eyebrow at her short friend.

"I'm advising her to stop *acting* like a spineless wimp," said Natsuki, "Anyone who can fight toe-to-toe with me is *better* than that."

Natsuki's friends all stared at her. "That…sounded oddly complimentary," Monika commented.

"Hey, don't get me wrong; she's crazy and I hate her," Natsuki said resolutely, "That doesn't mean she isn't worthy of my respect. Badass recognizes badass. And either way, I can't stand it when a girl shows a complete absence of self-respect."

"See? Natsuki's halfway to liking you already," said Sayori, who was now standing by Yuno and patting her on the back, half-hugging her.

"I am nowhere *close* to liking her *and why are you comforting her* ?!" Natsuki demanded.

"Complimenting people backhandedly *is* your halfway point to becoming friends with them, though," Yuri pointed out. "And yes, Sayori, *why are you being nice to her* ?!"

"I told you, already," said Sayori, "She's like one of us!"

"I am uncomfortable with that sentiment on several levels, Sayori," said Monika with arms crossed.

"Commits atrocities in the name of love," said Sayori, pointing at Monika, before moving her finger towards Yuri's general direction,

"Affinity for sharp, pointy things and blood," she moved her finger over to Natsuki, "Likes cute things and was abused by a parent," and finally she pointed at herself with her thumb, "Abysmal sense of self-worth."

Her friends were silent for a moment. "Abused how?" asked Natsuki, her voice tight and relatively subdued.

"Starvation and emotional neglect, mostly," said Sayori. "She was adopted by an infertile couple. Dad was super busy and not around much. Mom was mentally unstable and super-stressed out. Took it out on Yuno whenever her grades were less than perfect. Locked her in a cage; Yuno would get so hungry she would tear up bits of the tatami mats in her room and try to eat that, only to throw it up because it got stuck in her throat." Yuno was staring agape at Sayori, and Natsuki had lost all the color in her face. Monika and Yuri looked troubled as well, but not so personally impacted. "Despite that," Sayori continued, "She didn't hate her parents. She just wanted them to understand what she was going through. So she drugged them and stuck them in the cage once. But…it went wrong, and they died. She didn't mean for it to happen, but it did. After that, she felt truly worthless. And that would be when you entered her life, Yuri. Can you recall how that happened?"

Yuri looked thoughtful. Then she blushed and looked down. "I see… yes, I can understand that…"

"Yes. You became her Hiroaka, as it were. And then the two of you got involved in this game of death, and she sure as hell wasn't going to let you die. But then you did, and it was her fault, even though she hadn't meant it that way. She meant to bring you back, so you could be together and the world wouldn't have to end. All she's ever had, so far, was a shitty life and good intentions that brought disaster. All she wants is to be with the person who makes her happy, in a world that just won't allow that to happen. Can you *blame* her for losing her mind?"

More silence. Deus watched them thoughtfully. Natsuki, Yuri, and Monika all looked thoughtful. Akise noticed that Keigo had the same expression he did; that of a man who understood, at least on some level, the gravity of the situation, but had completely given up any hope of understanding exactly what was going on. Reisuke, the redhaired boy, looked completely bored and indifferent. Tsubaki looked annoyed. Marco, Ai, and Kamado were all wiping tears from their eyes. John Bacchus looked even more irritated than Tsubaki, and Tenth…had fallen asleep. Both Murumurus, the one in the cage and the one now perched on Deus's shoulder, were watching Yuno and Sayori intently.

"Sayori," Monika spoke up softly, "How much does this mean to you?"

Sayori took a deep breath. "I believe, with all my heart, that she could be like one of us, if we had met her under kinder circumstances. She's done horrible things, I'll admit…but she's not a horrible person, any more than you are, President. Just a lovesick girl trapped in a hopeless situation…so I guess you could say that she means about the same to me as you do, Monika."

Abruptly, Monika turned around. "Damn it, I can't stand it when you have that look in your eyes, Sayori…damn it…DEUS!"

" **Yes?** " asked Deus, his gaze sliding from Sayori to Monika.

Monika shrugged her jacket off and pulled out a gun she'd had tucked into her pants, behind her back. She looked directly at the God of this world while pressing the gun to her own head. "I'm sick of this stupid world…name Sayori as your successor, or I'm ending this loop and I don't care what happens to me in the next. She's the one most worthy of your Throne. She'd go through hell to make other people happy, whether they deserve it or not. And as Sayori's friends, we'll take responsibility for Gasai Yuno and her fucked up head. So name Sayori as your successor or I'll wipe out everything."

Deus turned his Throne to fully face Monika, and leaned forward. At the same time, the section of floor Monika stood on lifted up and drifted towards him, until their faces were inches apart. " **Is that so?** "

"It is. I can't take one more second of this sadistic nonsense," said Monika.

" **And the dire punishment for destroying realities that you and your fellow "Loopers" seemed so concerned about?** "

"If Sayori is this invested in Yuno's happiness, then as her friend I'm willing to deal with it."

"I, on the other hand," spoke up Natsuki, "Just want to say that if *I* get put through Eiken because of this, I will *pray* for a chance to come back to this miserable Branch and give Yuno the worst ass-kicking I possibly can. And you're gonna fucking *owe me* so badly, Sayori."

"I concur," said Yuri, folding her arms.

"Understood," Sayori replied.

" **I see,** " said Deus, " **Well, seeing as you're gambling your life for someone else's gain, and seeing as your friend seems to possess such boundless compassion…and if we really are to go by the assumption that your life is somehow entangled with causality itself…then I suppose that I really have no better option than to acquiesce to your ultimatum, Hiya–** "

"Monika," Monika interrupted. "It's–"

" *Just Monika,* " Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki all chorused in tandem with her. In spite of the situation, they all smiled at her, at least a little bit.

"…yeah," Monika sighed, lowering her gun.

" **Ahem. If you four are quite done…I hereby declare the Survival Game to be over. The Twelfth Future Diary Owner, Hirasaka Sayori, is the winner, and my successor as the God of Time and Space.** "

Deus reached into his own chest, extracting what appeared to be a small, glowing crystal. A blinding, burning light consumed the Cathedral…

…

3:24 PM, May 5 th :

"These fucking legsssssssss," Natsuki hissed as she hobbled along down the sidewalk on a pair of crutches.

"You're absurdly lucky you didn't *lose* either of those legs to infection, you know," remarked Akise. He walked next to her with his hands buried in his jacket pockets.

"Oh, who asked ya?" Natsuki snapped. Seeing as she was, after all, an internationally wanted criminal, she was wearing a disguise. A disguise which included blackening her hair and wearing an eyepatch, because Natsuki figured it was appropriate. Walking behind her was Yuno, who opened her mouth to speak. Before she could make a noise, however, Natsuki said, "Don't apologize! I can't stomach any more apologies from you; my legs aren't even your fault. As soon as I'm all healed up and I kick your ass good and proper, we'll be even."

Next to Yuno, Yuri pulled her ice cream bar from her mouth and said, "Don't let her get to you, Yuno. The fact that she's just making threats and not acting on them means that you're growing on her."

"Don't put any such delusions in her twisted head, Yuri," said Natsuki. " *If* I ever warm up to her–which I very much doubt–it'll be *after* she's repaid me for all the stress she put us through."

"I'm sor–"

" *What did I say, Gasai* ?!" yelled Natsuki, whirling around and swinging a crutch at Yuno's head. Yuno ducked and the crutch smacked Yuri's ice cream bar out of her hand. Natsuki lost her balance and started to fall, so she flailed her arms and latched on to one of Akise's.

"Hey!" protested the amateur detective as he was pulled to the ground along with Natsuki. Yuno clapped a hand over her mouth, trying in vain to apologize even as she snickered uncontrollably.

"Well, that's just your karma for being such a sore winner," said Yuri, watching her frozen treat on the sidewalk with mournful eyes.

"Yep! That's your resolution, Natsuki!" chirped the young woman leading the group.

"Restitution," Yuri corrected, "Come on, you should know *that* one by now…"

"That was *exactly* what I said," Sayori said with a huff, sticking her nose in the air. "You shouldn't argue with me like that, Yuri. I was a god, y'know."

"Yes, for all of three seconds," Akise reminded her.

"Yeah, then ya hot-potato-ed Deus's core at Monika and said "Not it!"," added Natsuki as she and Akise helped each other to their feet. "I'm pretty sure no one else in the history of the multiverse has ever made it their first, last, and only act as a deity to pass off the job to someone else."

"Ahem, my *second* and last act as a deity," said Sayori, waving her hand in front of her bright, clear, fully-functional peepers.

"Whatever," said Natsuki, "C'mon, we gotta get there by 3:30, right? No reason to keep Her Holiness waiting."

"I got a call from Chief Inspector Kurusu yesterday," Akise suddenly spoke up as the quintet continued down the street. "He didn't have anyone else's number, so he wanted me to pass the word on; his son 'mysteriously' made a complete recovery, and he's back home now."

"Then your friend is keeping her promises. That's good," said Yuno.

"Yeah. As much of a screw-up as she is, Monika's good for her word," agreed Natsuki.

Yuno frowned. "I just don't understand how you can say mean things like that about your friends."

"It's part of her charm, being a prickly ball of fluff," said Yuri, suddenly running up behind Natsuki and sweeping her off of her feet. "And we wouldn't want her any other way~" Yuri sang over the sound of Natsuki yelling protests. With the struggling young woman secured in Yuri's arms, the group proceeded at a much brisker pace. After a moment, Natsuki stopped struggling and resigned herself to sulking in Yuri's ironclad grip.

Yuno glanced off to the side, her face and her fists tightening. In less than a heartbeat, Sayori was by her side. "I know it's tough," she said gently, too softly for anyone but Yuno to hear her, "But you *have* to trust me on this one; sometimes, friendship is a much more important love than romance."

"I know, I know," Yuno replied sullenly, "It still hurts like hell, though."

"Rejection always does, no matter how gently delivered," Sayori whispered, "But I assure you, if it weren't for Natsuki it would be different. Yuri's usually down for one-loop stands…except, suspiciously enough, for when there's an Awake Natsuki around. But hey, that's how it is. Besides, Yuri's not your true love anyways. She just happened to take his place for this loop. When the loop resets, you won't remember any of us."

"So you keep telling me," Yuno sighed. "I just can't imagine how this 'Yukiteru' guy you keep talking about could be as great as–Eep!"

Yuno squeaked as Sayori stopped and pulled her into a tight hug. "Oh gods, she's *hugging* it again," said Natsuki. But, to Yuno's surprise, Natsuki said it with a smile, watching them from over Yuri's shoulder. Yuri had stopped and turned to watch them as well, smiling a smile that made Yuno's stomach knot up. But, at the very least, she tried to smile back. To her surprise, Yuri and Natsuki's reaction was to *stop* smiling. Yuri put Natsuki down, and the next thing Yuno found herself in the middle of a group hug.

"Huh?" was all she could articulate.

"Pavlovian response," grunted Natsuki, "We see someone faking a smile, we give them a hug. It's all Sayori's fault, of course. So…don't think we're doing this for *you* , Psycho."

"Heh…right," said Yuno, hugging the other three back.

"We are *officially* running late," said Akise, looking at his watch.

"Way to kill the mood, dude!" Sayori yelled at him.

…

The five of them made it to the park. The message they had all received on their phones hadn't specified a particular area in the park, only to find someplace where they would be alone. So they did so.

Several minutes passed.

"Well? Where is she?!" demanded Natsuki impatiently.

"Waiting for exactly that cue," said a familiar voice from behind them. Everyone whirled around.

" *MONIKA!* " yelled Sayori and Yuri, tackling their friend to the ground.

"Holy crap, guys, it's only been three days!" Monika squealed, giggling as the three of them got back up.

"And any five seconds that I'm not keeping an eye on you is five seconds too long," drawled Natsuki, limping towards them, "Three whole days is just downright unacceptable, young lady."

"*Snrk* I'm only a *few hundred thousand* years older than you, Nat," Monika said drily. "All the same, I'm sorry I worried you."

"Damn right, you're sorry," said Natsuki as she finally reached Monika and threw an arm around her shoulder, hugging her as well.

"Huh," said Yuno, "So Natsuki really does express affection by saying mean things."

"Man, we really need to get you that Tsundere nametag, Natsuki," said Sayori.

"I've got my Tsundere nametag right here," said Natsuki, one-fingered saluting Sayori, who giggled.

"So why *were* you gone for three days, Monika?" asked Yuri.

"Deus and the Murmurs were giving me a crash course in Causality Management, and other things like that," said Monika. "As it happens, I still have a lot to learn in the little time Deus has left." She sounded exhausted. "Managing an entire universe that runs on actual physics, with relativity and quantum mechanics and other such non-Newtonian thing, is a lot more difficult than maintaining our home, though thankfully most of the mental disciplines are transferrable…Sayori, you finished the Backups for this Branch. Any guess when this loop might end?"

"Oh…anytime between the 28th of July…to ten-thousand years from now," replied Sayori.

Everyone rounded on her and stared in stunned silence.

"You mean…to tell me…we're gonna have to *grow old* with Psycho over here?!" demanded Natsuki, jabbing a finger at Yuno.

"Well…" Sayori smiled nervously, pushing her fingers together, "I… don't know if it's possible for Monika to make anyone else immortal… but assuming she can't, and that this loop runs all the way to the endpoint in the backups, then yes, it's most likely we're all going to live out our natural lifespans before the loop ends. Which, admittedly, was part of my reason for wanting Monika to become God. I wasn't sure if a crash caused by the Anchor dying of old age before the loop's end would still be a punishable offense."

"Hmph…well, you know what? That's just great!" said Natsuki, who actually looked like she meant it. She was grinning the broadest she had for the entire loop so far. "I'll get *years'* worth of kicking Yuno's ass! And you and Yuri can train her so that it'll stay interesting! Damn it, but I just can't wait for this stupid body to fix itself up," she wound up grumbling.

"Why wait?" asked Monika with a mischievous look in her eyes. She snapped her fingers.

Natsuki's eyes widened, and she gasped. She looked down at her legs, and grin widened even more. She threw down her crutches, jumped up, and did a scissor kick. Then a backflip. Then a front flip. Then she did a Muay Thai kata. "Oh-hohohoho, YES! Fuck yes! Gasai!" Natsuki roared with glee, "Prepare yourself for combat!"

"Wait, what?!" Yuno asked as Natsuki threw herself at her fellow pinkette.

While Natsuki chased Yuno around the park, with Yuri shouting out helpful tips to the younger girl and Akise recording on his phone,

Sayori slid up next to Monika. "Thank you, Prez," she said softly, giving her a gentle, earnest hug, and a peck on the cheek.

Monika chuckled, "Thanks for what? Making my club members happy is what I do, Veepee. You know that."

"I do. And that doesn't make it mean any less to me," replied Sayori.

"Well…you know how it is…our club is our family, and family is always there when you need them…now, sadly, I need to get back to training," Monika sighed. "I'll pop in to catch up with you guys when I can. In the meantime, I trust you can look out for things down here?"

"Of course," Sayori said with a nod, "That's what I do, after all. Anything I can to help."

"You're doing God's work, Sayori," said Monika, patting her on the head. Then she froze, and then she laughed, "Hahahaha, *literally* ! You're literally doing My work! Ho man, I'm a one-woman riot."

"Hey now, watch out with capitalizing your own pronouns," said Sayori sternly, "That's a slippery slope, y'know."

"…how–?"

"It was the way you said it, duh. Now get along back to class, Ms. Model Student," said Sayori with a grin, "I can handle these yahoos."

"I know," said Monika, who turned around and disappeared.

A moment later, Sayori felt something light fall upon her head. Curiously, she grabbed it off of her head and looked at it. It was a chocolate chip cookie the size of her face. Sayori beamed, and turned her sky-blue eyes back to the others. Yuri had decided to join Yuno in her impromptu spar against Natsuki, who had dragged Akise in on her side, but it was clear the four of them were having fun. Sayori plopped down onto the grass and gave a sigh of satisfaction before biting into her cookie.

The sun was shining. The sky was cloudless. Her friends were laughing. And the cookie tasted like victory.

Afterword:

Alrighty, that was "Killer Glitches" y'all! Unfortunately, as of this posting there are not yet enough DDLC snips on Spacebattles to compile anymore chapters. You've probably noticed that, aside from Chapter 4 and this one, each chapter has consisted of eleven snips. That's the precedent my predecessor, Keluvax, set down. Thus, I have adopted it as my standard as well. For those of you who only know the Fanfiction Dot Net side of this, allow me to explain: the "snips" that make up these compilations are written on a forum site called Spacebattles. That's where the Infinite Loops Project is based. Specifically, the snips for Doki Doki Literature Club are hosted on the "Indie Games: Infinite Loops" Thread. As Compiler, my job is to round up the relevant snips and put them together over here. So, point being, I have no idea *when* there will be enough snips written to compile a new chapter. But whenever there are, that's what I'll do. Until then, thank you for your patience, and if you'd like to write snips for DDLC or ANY Looping franchise, join us over at Forums Dot Spacebattles Dot Com. The ILP is always open to new contributors.

Y'all have a HOWLING good day, mmkay?

Wolfman, Ow-Out!

Chapter 11

11.1 – Royal Audience (by Masterweaver)

(DDLC)/(Long Live The Queen)

"...if you would indulge my whims, perhaps I could ask you to help oversee the national installation of the printing press? Certainly it would allow you and yours to spread the poetic arts amongst Nova far more freely than you already do."

"Oh, certainly. It's actually kind of surprising to be in a loop so... well, I don't mean to be insulting, but, um..."

"Primitive?"

"It's not just the technology. Most worlds I know of that are pre-renaissance at least have some sort of fantasy aspect-I mean there's magic here and all but it's not... omnipresent. Or even big."

"Wait a few months, Lady Monika. I assure you that will be changed quickly." The princess smiled at a rapidly approaching figure. "Ah! And now we are complete, then. Briony, may I present Lady Monika Codeborn, current countess of Skathi, master of the arts textual and mental, president of the Doki Doki Literature Club, and Anchor of the same. Monika, I grant you Lady Briony of Mead, Duchess apparent, lumen heroine in potentia, once and perhaps future lady of the royal bedchambers, and second awakened looper of Nova."

"Oh hello! I was wondering what Elodie was doing over here." Briony gave the pink-haired girl a wry grin. "Normally you would have snatched up two slices of cake and half a dozen cookies by now."

"A royal sweet tooth, hm?" Monika chuckled. "Well, maybe I should get Natsuki to make you some of her cupcakes."

"I certainly would not be opposed, so long as they were not seen as bribery."

"Natsuki... that sounds Shanjian," Briony mused.

"Nipponese," Elodie corrected gently. "Although, yes, the county of Skathi has a number of Shanjian refugee families this loop. An interesting but ultimately minor detail... at least I hope. There would not be any foreign assassins in your court, would there Lady Monika?"

Monika waggled her hand. "Well, one of my friends was but then we all Woke Up and she fed me a list of the others. I've used my authority to provide a 'welfare' to the new immigrants that, simultaneously, keeps the assassins from leaving my jurisdiction and encourages them to defect via demonstration of how much nicer a peaceful life could be. That's, um, that's not going to be a problem is it?"

"I doubt it very much," Elodie assured her. "So long as you send regular reports of the situation, I should be able to handle them and the usual local attempts on my life."

Briony chuckled as she twirled the glass in her hand. "Yeah, we're not exactly the nicest loop around, sorry."

"Oh, I doubt you could top what my loop's like," Monika replied.

"You think so, huh?"

"Oh dear." Elodie smirked as she took a sip from her own glass. "You might have just gotten Briony competitive."

Monika frowned. "Are we seriously going to have a competition on who's the most traumatized? That's not exactly healthy."

"...Fair enough," Briony conceded. "It's just... I've had one fused loop-two if we count this one. And I love my home, don't get me

wrong, it's... home, obviously, but... knowing that we don't even have things that other worlds consider standard... I mean, self-cleaning chamber pots."

"...Toilets?"

"Yes, those things. They could change everything. But... we barely have the industry for one per castle, let alone practical sanitization of entire cities."

"Now be fair," Elodie admonished. "I do institutionalize proper waste management laws and services. It usually only takes four months, if that."

"It's... better, but not the same," Briony grumbled.

"Right..." Monika rolled her eyes. "You think your life is shitty, at least you have shit. My world is literally just a computer program-not 'a game in the hub' but actually 'full on matrix computer program'-and not even a fancy one. Just a dating sim."

"What's a dating sim?"

"Dating simulator," she explained. "The player gets a selection of so many pre-programed pretty faces, and if you take options X or Y or Z, you'll wind up with the girl of your choice! Which of course means we don't 'need' anyone who isn't part of the game, so it's just the four of us-me, Sayori, Yuri, and Natusuki. And technically Hiroaka, but he's..." She paused. "He's literally got no face, just a puppet for the player."

"Oh, some sort of... video game, then." Briony frowned. "How... did they know what the girls looked like, these players? Was the game text-based...?"

"Her other fused loop landed us in the sixties," Elodie explained to Monika. "And she has always been a more physical kind of girl, so..."

"Ah. No, we're set in an era with very high-fidelity graphics and animation. I wouldn't suggest you look us up in the hub though." Monika coughed awkwardly. "Let's just say... things go off the rails fast."

"...Off the rails," Briony repeated blankly.

"Train metaphor," Elodie explained. "To go outside known boundaries, usually with disastrous results."

The green-haired girl glowered grumpily at her glass. "See, that's the point. This is a common saying, and I didn't get it, because I come from this world and... I don't know, I'd like to think I can prove something to the greater multiverse."

"Hey, you'll find your calling," Monika assured her. "Maybe you should start by looking at what parts of baseline you do like."

"I mean there was the Lady of the Royal Bedchamber thing, but apparently that's not even something that's regular."

"Our baseline is very unstable," Elodie said sadly. "Mostly reliant on my own decisions, which is both a blessing and a curse. That said, you do have a rather adventurous streak to you, Briony. Perchance you should consider taking up dragonslaying in a proper manner?"

"After what happened in the old forest? I don't know, Elodie..."

"What happened in the old forest involved a young and foolish girl trying to get the attention of her parents without any reasonable preparation. That was certainly not true dragonslaying."

"...Well, yeah," Briony said flatly. "That's my point."

"I think what Elodie is saying is that, now that you know what you did wrong you can make sure you don't do it wrong again," Monika pointed out, rubbing her arm awkwardly. "You know. Second

chances. Self-improvement. I'm sure somebody here could teach you how to use a sword."

"And a bow, and a spear, and how to ride a horse, and how to properly wear armor and dodge incoming blows, and that is not even going into the potential of Lumen ability-"

"Alright already," Briony deadpanned, "I get it, you can do anything."

"Well, I can *now,"* Elodie conceded. "But it did take quite a bit of training. Frankly, I started off in a worse position then you have now."

Monika nodded. "See? Elodie took time to train herself in the loops-"

"That was all baseline," Briony deadpanned.

"...wait, seriously?"

"Different iterations," Elodie clarified, "but yes, as queen apparent I have access to a number of qualified trainers-access I would gladly share with my friend should she but ask."

"...Huh." Monika nodded slowly. "And... do you still do that?"

"I keep up with physical classes, mostly-to keep my own body in shape. The mystical classes I have mastered, but they are taught by individuals I have personal and political interests in, so I make a token effort there to keep their attention... and usually I do a quick skimming of history and intrigue to see if there is any small detail that has varied in the iteration. Most of what I could be taught has become second habit, if I am honest."

"The burdens of being queen," Briony said melodramatically.

"For longer than a lifetime," Elodie agreed sadly. "But I am willing to offer you said training, as soon as you wish."

"I'd have to come up to the capital all the time. Not that I mind, but how would I explain to my parents and the rest of my family I'd be

gone for weeks on end?"

"We could begin courting again."

"I mean, yeah, but that would... feel kind of wrong, you know? Just pretending to be in love so I could get training?"

"I suppose."

Monika cleared her throat. "Maybe you could use some sort of teleporter or something? A spell or a portal, what have you?"

"We are still fairly new to looping," Elodie pointed out. "We have had little opportunity to gather such abilities."

"...Good point." Monika tapped her chin. "I'll talk with the girls when I get back, see if we don't have anything you might find useful. And anyway, adventure training isn't a bad idea in any case, you never know where in the multiverse you'll end up."

"Who knows? Mayhap one day, you shall be the one to slay the keythong."

Briony chuckled awkwardly. "Well... maybe. I don't know-"

"I believe I might make it a requirement, in fact," Elodie mused. "That every looper from Nova, at least once, take down the Keythong."

"I think that might be an abuse of power," Monika pointed out.

"Or a test of skill," Elodie replied. "As you said, the multiverse is harsh. Being able to face one of the least of our monsters is excellent preparation."

"You know what?" Briony said. "I'll do it. I've been playing the shy new looper for too long, it's time to get myself back on my feet."

"Now that is a worthy cause," Elodie agreed. "Of course, it is too late this loop, but you know where and when it will be around. If you like,

I shall personally oversee your training."

"And since I'm apparently not going to be able to talk you out of it," Monika sighed, "I'll go ahead and be the one to train you. Well, me and my friends. Between the lot of us, we've got to be able to find something you're good at."

"I would suggest aiming for a magical warrior of some sort," Elodie offered. "Not only is Briony capable of becoming a lumen, but I have found magic is sometimes required to slay the beast-though reliance on magic alone is of course detrimental."

"Mystic knight? Yeah, I think we can do that. What do you say, Briony, you up for it?"

"Yeah! Well, not right now. Let's wait till Elodie gets coronated, there's actually a lot coming up in the next month or two-"

"Ah yes, the war." Elodie smiled sadly. "How I wish I could avoid it."

11.2 – Box-Cutter? (by Wookywok)

Natsuki quirked an eyebrow. "A knife. Made out of cardboard."

"And a little wax for waterproofing." Yuri turned the paper blade around in her hand. "I'll admit, I didn't think much of it when I first heard about it, but watching the video I realized just how effective it actually is."

"A… knife. Made out of cardboard."

"The actual process of making it was remarkably simple - especially since I already had most of the materials in my Pocket and cardboard boxes are remarkably cheap. The FRAGILE stamp is just there to provide a whimsical touch."

"A KNIFE. Made out of CARDBOARD."

"It's nothing I'll actually be regularly *using* much, of course -any perks it could have in everyday life are basically mitigated by just having a Subspace Pocket - but it'll definitely make a unique piece for my collection."

Natsuki shook her head. "I fail to understand you sometimes, Yuri." She turned to the clubroom door. "Have fun with your M-rated Labo. I hear Sayori's on the Holodeck training Monika for her rematch with Emerald."

11.3 – Pets? (by Masterweaver)

It was a quiet day in the literature club. Natsuki was reading a manga, Yuri was compiling a poem, Sayori was braiding Hiroaka's hair, and Monika had a dazzling array of schematics and charts in front of her.

"Mmmm. Hey, how does everyone feel about me trying to code in non-sapient animals?"

Natsuki glanced up. "Are we talking about, like, pets, or pests, or... what?"

"Well, I was kind of thinking birds and rabbits, background critters."

"I could go for some birdwatching," Yuri mused.

"Might be nice to see some rabbits," Sayori agreed.

Natsuki tapped her chin. "I mean if they just run in and out... that's probably the easiest, but also the most disappointing-

There was a sudden sense of disconnect, as if each of their brains had been turned sideways for a brief moment. It lasted less than a second, but then Yuri and Natsuki were standing in opposite corners of the room, and Monika in front of the door.

"...okay," Yuri managed, "that just happened-"

"Where's Sayori?" Natsuki asked urgently. "Monika, where is-?"

"Hold on, hold on!" Monika had already reformed one of her screens. "She's-oh. Oh, right."

"What? WHAT?!"

"She's introducing the Player to the game," Monika explained, sending the screen away with a snap of her fingers. "We just started a new session, that's all."

There was a pause.

"...Right," Yuri managed. "We are a computer program, I guess."

Natsuki groaned. "Please tell me our free will isn't going to be overridden for dumb drama."

"I don't think so, no. Sayori seems to be going off script a bit-telling him about the depression up front." Monika shrugged. "Let's not... mention the whole 'we know we're in a game' thing today, alright? See how this guy acts."

"Of course," Yuri agreed. "Best to read their actions before we reveal ourselves."

"If he treats us bad," Natsuki said seriously, "spam his inbox with memes."

11.4 – You Get What You Paid For (by Awesomedude17)

Yuri looked over the rather ornate and jagged knife with a split tip she had brought online and frowned.

"This isn't what I was expecting. Ugh, and one of the tips." Looking over the bend on one of the tips, grabbing it between two of her fingers to try and straighten it out.

SNAP

"...That's the last time I buy cool looking knives online." Yuri placed the broken blade in the smelt pile in her Pocket, having learned a life lesson in online shopping.

You get what you paid for.

11.5 – Hax0r (by Masterweaver)

It was a quiet day in the literature club. Natsuki was icing a cupcake, Yuri was compiling a poem, Sayori was braiding Hiroaka's hair, and Monika had a dazzling array of schematics and charts in front of her.

"You know what I could really go for?" Yuri mused. "Pancake pizza."

"...Is that pizza with pancakes as the topping," Sayori asked, "or pizza with a pancake as the base?"

"...I think the second. I can see the first being a thing, but it would be so much harder to do."

"I mean, swap out the yeast for baking powder, the oil for milk, add egg and butter..." Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I could see this being a thing."

Suddenly the various screens in front of Monika scrambled randomly.

"Um." Sayori looked over as their club president began rapid-fire typing. "What's... what's going on?"

"We're being hacked. Or, well, the computer we're on is being hacked."

"Is it Hollywood hacking or realistic hacking?" Yuri asked.

"It's 'where the hell is this coming from' hacking, give me a few seconds."

For a moment the club was silent.

Then Monika paled. "Erm."

"Monika," Natsuki said cautiously, "what did you do?"

"Nothing! Nothing. Well, technically nothing. Nothing has happened yet, I mean."

"Monika-"

"On an, aha, entirely unrelated note, what's everybody's opinion on, oh I don't know, the FBI, CIA, just, um, general government computer things?"

"...Did you just hack the U.S.A. government files?" Sayori managed.

"No! No. No, I can safely say that I definitely did not hack government files, no."

"Oh good."

"Not the files."

Yuri sighed. "You're in control of the U.S. government computer network aren't you."

"...kiiiiiiiiind of?" Monika winced. "Just... just a little, um... central node, really."

Natsuki nodded. "Welp, best thing we can do is release the secrets of corrupt politicians to world news reporters. Give 'em hell, kay?"

"I... dunno if I should-"

"They tried to hack us first, this is a proper revenge."

11.6 – Expanding the Collection (by Cyberbeta)

Natsuki blinked as she found Yuri with a notepad and a stack of manga pulled out of her collection closet. Close examination

revealed that they were from a series she had not added to her Pocket yet, named Hunter X Hunter. Noticing Yuri checking something before taking up a pen and beginning to make some notes she decided to get to the point.

Clearing her throat to get Yuri's attention she spoke "So, you don't normally raid my collection. What's caught your interest?"

Yuri looked up from her writing, "Oh, sorry. It's just that since we have been looping, and you know I have been just building my collection, I decided to start checking other forms of literature for unique knives in case we ever go there."

Setting down her pen she turned the manga to show the wicked looking knife on the page. "While I don't know if this world is looping or is one we can visit, I do know that there are over 100 knives from one section alone to add to my collection, each one different from the last in design."

Natsuki took a moment to look closer at the information given. 'Serial Killing Blacksmith...each knife made after a murder...design influenced by victim...' Looking back at Yuri she spoke what she was thinking. "While interesting, you know the odds of finding all 288 before the loop ends, not to mention if you are killed instead?"

Yuri smirked, "More interesting than that, only two of the knives have confirmed looks, and one with an ability. That means while two are known, 286 will be Loop Variable if I even end up in Hunter X Hunter. I might even be able to negotiate with Chrollo Lucifer for his: offer my Nen Ability I create there for it, then make a new ability the next time I loop in."

Natsuki looked doubtful, "I don't think that's how that would work there."

Yuri just shrugged. "Maybe, but this is still the planning stages." Pointing to the closet with the pen she continued, "I left the other volumes in the closet when I cleaned up and finished each one.

Maybe I'll find some more interesting things in the other chapters...though Illumi's needles are a definite no for me."

Leaving Yuri to her note taking, Natsuki went to the closet and pulled out the first volume to begin reading. It always helped to know more about a potential loop one could end up in.

11.7 – Strictly Commercial (by Masterweaver)

It was a quiet day in the literature club. Natsuki was reading a manga, Yuri was organizing a spread of knives, Sayori was braiding Hiroaka's hair, and Monika had a dazzling array of schematics and charts in front of her.

"So," Natsuki said without preamble. "Is anybody else tired of grim and gritty reboots slash adaptations?"

"Well, the bad ones," Yuri agreed, "yeah, I can do without those. Grit should be... natural, I think. Part of the setting. Adding grit isn't going to make things better, it has to be... grown, I think."

Sayori chuckled. "Oh, natural grown grit. Sounds like a breakfast cereal."

Natsuki snorted. "Oh, that's hilarious. 'Tired of eating RAW IRON NAILS IN LAVA? Try Natural Grit, the *MANLIEST* cereal on the planet!'"

"It turns your milk as hairy as your chest!" Yuri intoned. "You'll be able to lift two cars-one full of nubile women, the other containing your favorite football team!"

"Natural Grit, part of this complete breakfast." Sayori nodded. "Stud muffins, hand-crushed apple juice, and king cobra milk sold separately. Oh but they come with collectable barbells, or something."

"Sorry girls," Monika deadpanned, "it got pulled from the shelves after the health department found it causing an epidemic of lethally toxic masculinity." She glanced up. "On an unrelated topic, how do we all feel about the development of artificial consciousness in the real world?"

The other three looked at each other.

"...that's an abrupt subject change," Sayori said finally.

"Just... thoughts."

"Are you trying to get us robot bodies?" Yuri asked.

Monika opened her mouth, paused, and sighed. "Okay, fine, yes. I found a system that might work, but they're really short robots. Like, maybe a foot tall."

"Mmmm..." Natsuki frowned. "I mean... what would we do with robot bodies? On the one hand, cool and all, and we'd get to interact with the real world, on the other... well, with hardware limitations, we'd feel more real here then we would out there."

"...Oh."

"...We could still do some things," Sayori suggested. "Like... be anonymous rescue drones, or something."

"Yeah... the benevolent AI route." Yuri nodded. "That could be fun. Especially if we got to ride in the flying drone bodies."

"Alright." Monika turned back to her screens. "Let me just find a good node for that."

11.8 – Implications (by Black Omochao)

It was near the beginning of another Baseline run for the Literature Club.

All four Loopers were Awake. Monika had just finished implementing her typical improvements to their Branch's code, everything seemed to be going fine–

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Monika, Natsuki and Yuri all winced in pain at the sudden assault on their artificial-eardrums, before looking towards the source of the sound: the normally blank-slate of an MC, Hiroaka.

Sayori stood by the sole male's side, covering her ears while also trying to calm him down. "IT'S OKAY! EVERYTHING'S OKAY!" the vice-president shouted over Hiroaka's own screams.

"SAYORI, WHAT'S GOING ON WITH HIM!" Natsuki shouted as well.

Sayori turned her way with an unreadable expression. "I DON'T KNOW! HE WON'T STOP SCREAMING!"

"WHY DID HE START SCREAMING!?" Yuri shouted, turning to the club president. "MONIKA, DID YOU SCREW WITH SOMETHING IN THE CODE BY MISTAKE!?"

"I DIDN'T TOUCH HIS CODE!" the Anchor insisted.

"WHATEVER THE REASON, DOES ANYONE HAVE AN IDEA ON HOW TO GET HIM TO STOP!?" Sayori shouted again with growing worry and frustration.

However, it wasn't long before the blank-faced MC did stop screaming, letting out a few breaths.

The girls felt some relief that the noise had stopped. "What was that about…?" Yuri asked slowly. She walked over to Hiroaka and waved her hand in front of his face, but he didn't respond.

"I didn't touch his code…" Monika repeated. "There's also nobody playing the game right now…"

A feeling of uneasiness filled the room as the four Loopers kept their eyes on the, supposedly, mindless Player Character…

"Well… I'm sure it was nothing to worry about." Sayori gave a somewhat unconvincing smile. "Do you guys have any ideas on what we should do this Loop?"

Despite the uneasiness still permeating through the air, the other three club members began throwing out suggestions for what they could do this Loop. Their eyes would still occasionally return focus to the MC, but he would not act out in any way for the remainder of the Loop…

11.9 – Economic Magic (by Masterweaver)

It was a quiet day in the literature club. Natsuki was reading a manga, Yuri was compiling a poem, Sayori was playing with a paddleball, and Monika had a dazzling array of schematics and charts in front of her.

"So... best magic system," Yuri said. "Go."

Natsuki rolled her eyes. "What are we defining as best, here? Best for me, best for everyone, best for a specific task?"

"That is a quandary," Sayori mused. "Obviously we can't just say godlike power, because that solves everything-"

"No it doesn't," Monika interjected with a faint smile.

"Well, *in theory* it can solve anything-"

"No it can't."

"-assuming godlike competence," Sayori finished with an annoyed glare.

"Have you read Greek mythology?" Monika asked. "Or Norse? Or Aztec, or Japanese-"

"That diary loop didn't turn out so bad."

"I was running a pre-made world with minimal intervention," Monika said flatly. "And I wasn't omniscient. Without wanting to be."

Sayori rolled her eyes. "The point is, if we're trying to find the best magic system, we have to assume the magic in question is something that does not effectively make the magic user into a god."

"What are we defining as a god?" Yuri asked innocently.

Sayori groaned. "Oh come on, can we not have one theoretical debate without going over the semantics?"

"I'm still wondering which 'best' we're using," Natsuki pointed out.

"You two are teasing me. Ganging up on me to tease me, just because Monika did."

"No, we're ganging up on you to tease you because it's fun," Natsuki replied.

"And because it's a socially acceptable way to prod you and figure out what your current mental state is because we subconsciously cannot ever forget the few times we were ignorant of your depression which resulted horribly," Yuri added.

She noticed all the eyes on her.

"...What? Do none of you do that?"

"Usually I just ask," Nats said warily.

"I kind of keep track of how many times she gets an episode and stay alert if she goes a hundred loops without a breakdown," Monika added.

"...I am simultaneously touched and disturbed," Sayori managed.

Natsuki smirked. "That's how the Dokies roll, baby."

Everyone chuckled for a few moments.

"...Hey," Yuri said suddenly, "isn't now usually the time when Monika reveals something about our digital nature has affected the real world?"

All eyes turned to the club president.

"We don't have to be strictly formula," Monika said flatly.

The eyes continued staring.

She groaned. "Fine. I've transferred two percent of the top ten wealthiest individual's money to the bottom billion's wealthiest individual accounts, and written up programs to keep doing that on a monthly basis."

"There, see?" Yuri gestured with a smirk. "When she's got the screens she's on the scene."

"Would you *like* me to be unpredictable?"

"Hell fucking no!" Natsuki said firmly.

11.10 – Gnatsuki (by Wookywok)

Sayori panned her eyes over her fellow club members - rather tricky, given her compound eyes. "So, we're all insects this loop. Anybody wanna take a guess as to why we are what we are?"

Monika put a foreleg to her… chin-analogue. "Well, Sayo, you're a ladybug because of that special poem from that Hub convention… Yuri's a death's-head moth because of the horror novel thing… I'm a queen bee because I'm the leader…"

Monika looked over at the smallest member of the Literature Club - even smaller than normal. "And Natsuki's that because… she's the

shortest, I guess?"

Gnatsuki did an insect facepalm. "No, but if I never have another Pun Loop again, it'll be too soon."

11.11 – A Chance Meeting (by Masterweaver)

(DDLC)/(Shelter)

It was a quiet day in the literature club. Natsuki was reading a manga, Yuri was compiling a poem, Sayori was braiding Hiroaka's hair, and Monika was twinking something out on a guitar.

"Dum dah... dum dee dee... dee dee deee? Dum... no." The club president frowned at the instrument in her hands.

Sayori glanced over. "What's up?"

"I am just so used to the piano, that's all, I don't think I can figure out how to write a song on this."

Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, I wasn't going to say anything... but that is one big cat you're strangling."

Monika gave her a glare. "Can you do better?"

Natsuki put down her manga and held out her hands. With an eyeroll, Monika handed the guitar over.

"Oooo!" Yuri sat down next Sayori, clapping hands. "Here it comes, here it comes..."

Five and a half minutes passed.

"...Okay," Monika conceded. "Damn. Wow. I just... wow."

Natsuki smirked. "Yep."

"I mean I knew you could play bass, but that's not a bass."

"I'm good with cello too. And a violin. Still working on the banjo."

Yuri clapped gleefully. "Yeeeeeees! Yes! Oh my frikin' gods yes!"

"Damn," Sayori managed, "and I thought *I'd* be the master of strings."

Natsuki glowered at her. "Not funny."

"It is a little bit."

"No it isn't."

Yuri rolled her eyes. "Hey, Monika, can you put that on YouTube? I want to see it go viral."

"...Hmm." Monika rolled her eyes and, with a gesture, opened a free-floating screen. "Okay... mmhmm. What...?"

She peered at the text.

Then she opened another, quickly scrolling through a few articles.

Then a third...

Then her eyes went wide as she looked at the clock.

"Girls!" She shut off the screens and stood. "In my subspace pocket *now!"*

Natsuki looked up. "What? What's the problem, Prez?"

"We're on a doomed version of Earth," Monika explained, already decompiling the furniture. "There's another planet about to collide with it. We have to get off this computer-this network-the PLANET!"

"And since you're the one with the code-" Yuri began.

"-I'm the one that can carry us to whatever spaceship launches," Monika finished with a firm nod. "But I'll need to focus and... and I don't want to have to take you apart for the transit."

Sayori nodded, Pocketing Hiroaka. "We understand. Good luck, Monika."

She held out her hand, Yuri and Natsuki quickly placing their own on top of it. Monika grasped the three, pulled them into the dimension fueled by her soul, and then took one last look at the already empty clubroom.

One last deep inhale...

...then Monika stepped outside her game, compressed the files into a zip, and dove into the writhing data of the internet.

Rin looked up at the transparent ceiling of her simulated room. Her eyes didn't move, she didn't sigh, she just...

...looked up.

Stared, quietly, at the clouds floating by above her.

She'd seen this scene... twenty four times before. Twenty four times she'd been put into this shuttle, sent off a doomed Earth by her father... twenty-four times, lost in space.

Once she'd tried to bring more. That had failed. Then she'd had... it had to have been a fever dream, of some sort. One where she was a superhero-one of many. She'd had fun, but it... wasn't as though it had been real.

But what was real, here in the digital nothing of a floating ship in space? If she could open her eyes-her real eyes-she would see a series of screens, wires, and stars. Always the same. Here, it was

whatever she drew, translated and interpreted by the program. But was that even real?

Was she even...

What was that question? She was real. Obviously, she was real. Time repeating, again and again, that didn't stop... her being real. Did it?

"I think therefore I am," she mumbled. Her thoughts were slow, laden, but they existed. So she existed. It was... a fundamental aspect of her reality. Something she clung to. It couldn't be wrong.

It couldn't be wrong.

A sound. Sudden, brief. It took her a moment to realize it was a beep, coming from her tablet.

She glanced down at it, at the notification on the screen. A program had been activated, opened up other programs, was running in the background...

Huh. This file wasn't related to her life-support. Or to the flying of her ship. Or... anything. It was just... there.

"That's strange," she muttered, lying back down.

For a moment, she watched the clouds again.

Her eyes suddenly blinked.

"That's... *strange,"* she mumbled again, almost disbelieving.

Rin sat up, looking at her tablet, at the window. At the files running.

"...I've never seen .chr files before," she said quietly. "...And... these look like names. Why would there be files with... names..."

Her fingers reached for the tablet's search function, dragging it to the running files.

Another window opened, showing... a distant scene, with trees, and rocks, and...

"People?"

Four girls, in school uniforms, walking along and chatting amicably.

Rin stared for a long while.

Then she stood up. "I need to see this." With practiced ease, she stepped outside her room and into the formatted world of dreams.

Monika knelt down, running her fingers through a few blades of grass. "Hmmm."

Sayori knelt next to her. "What is it?"

"I wasn't sure... I'm still not sure. But I think this grass is procedurally generated. I'd have to look at the code directly to find out, though. Don't want to risk it."

"Yeah, okay..." Natsuki threw up her hands. "Monika, where even are we?"

"I told you, I snuck us aboard a download meant to go onto a long-term interstellar craft-"

"No, I don't mean where's our server. I mean this." Natsuki gestured around. "Why is there a simulation of basically reality running? What's it for?"

"Whoever's on the ship, obviously," Yuri replied. "It's probably R&R, a way to keep the crew from getting depressed-"

"If it were that, there would be a crew here, or the program wouldn't be running."

"...I guess that's a good point," Yuri conceded. "It is a rather complex simulation to leave running for nobody..."

"Maybe we're in a sim-game?" Sayori suggested as she stood. "Like... minecraft, but with less blocky graphics."

"...Maybe," Natsuki conceded. "Still seems a waste. Monika, what do you think?"

"Hmm?" Monika looked up.

"What this program is. What do you think?"

"...It's taking up a quarter of the computer's processing," Monika explained.

"A quarter?" Yuri frowned. "For a simulation, on an interstellar ship?"

"The rest is... life support, system maintenance, and sensors and piloting. I thought it was weird too." She looked around. "No animal life. These are landscapes, not environments-"

"Monika."

The club president looked at Sayori, who had walked over to a tree... and a swing hanging off a branch.

"Huh. That's interesting-"

"Monika," Sayori repeated slowly, "how large did you say this ship was?"

There was a pause.

"I didn't have time to check the schematics. It was... we had to get off the planet, and this one was ready to launch. I barely got us aboard

as is."

Sayori pushed the swing gently.

Monika approached, slowly. "Sayori?"

"A quarter of the system. No animal life. Procedural generation." Sayori looked at her. "One swing, in the middle of nowhere. That's a metaphor if I ever saw one."

Yuri covered her mouth with her hands, horror coating her expression. "One swing... one seat. If it's only one, it all makes sense-"

"Uh girls?" Natsuki pointed. "We, uh... we've got company."

They were talking with each other.

It sounded like English. She wasn't good with English, but it sounded like English...

They were investigating, talking to each other in English.

Rin clutched her tablet tightly. This wasn't for her-it hadn't been made for her. So... so was it... was it a problem?

One of them, the short one, noticed her and pointed. The other three followed the path of her finger.

For a moment, they all just looked at each other.

Then the one with brown hair waved, slowly, gently, saying something.

Rin peeled the grip of one of her hands free. Her wave back was silent, awkward, small.

This was apparently enough, for the moment. The brunette called the other girls over, and they talked in more English. They would glance at her from time to time with worried, sympathetic expressions. She bit her lip, quietly curling her toes in the simulated grass. Her eyes darted down toward the tablet, its running files. She glanced up again.

Apparently they had come to a decision. One of them stepped forward-not the small one, but the other one with pink hair. She approached Rin slowly, gently, with a small smile.

Rin took a step back. The girl stopped.

She said something, again in English.

"...I... I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"Oh! You speak Japanese." The pink-haired girl smiled. "Okay. I speak it too, see?"

Rin blinked. "Oh."

The two of them stared at each other.

"...My name is Sayori," said the girl. "What's yours?"

"It..." Rin swallowed. "It... my name is Rin..."

"It's nice to meet you, Rin! How are you?"

Rin stared at the friendly, gentle smile on Sayori's face. She couldn't... she couldn't...

Her hand clung to the tablet tightly. "What are you?"

"We're... um..." Sayori cringed. "How... how much do you know about... where you are?"

"I want to know what you are," Rin said, more firmly.

Sayori seemed to hesitate for a moment.

"Tell her," said the brunette suddenly, in japanese.

"Monika, she's clearly nervous-"

"So we tell her, and if she doesn't want to talk... we don't talk."

Rin blinked. "No, I-I want to talk, I just want to make sure you're not going to..."

She trailed off.

Sayori sighed. "We're AIs. Sapient computer programs. We... caught wind the world was ending, and jumped into the only shuttle off-planet we could find. We don't take up that much space, I promise, we just..."

"We just wanted to live," said the short one.

Rin glanced down at her tablet again.

"...Rin," Sayori said, starting to walk toward her again. "I promise, we're not going to hurt you. We can... we can be friends, alright?"

"This never happened before," Rin mumbled.

Sayori stopped dead. "...Before?"

"Before, I..." Rin shook her head. "It's... it's just... never mind."

For a moment there was silence.

"Rin..." Sayori's voice was gentle. "Have you... been repeating time?"

Rin's eyes snapped up. "How-?"

"We can explain, I promise. Do... do you want something to eat? We can have a picnic right here, and explain things."

"...Did you do this?"

"No," Sayori said, her tone resolute. "But we know what's going on. And we won't be here in your next loop, so..."

Her voice, her concern, seemed genuine. Rin looked down at her tablet again, still reading the names of the strange files.

Then she looked up. "...I... I have a room. It's... that way."

"Okay. Do you want to take us to your room?"

"...yes."

"Okay. Girls?" Sayori turned around. "Rin is going to lead us to her room, alright?"

"Fine by me," said the tall one.

Rin nodded. She turned around, starting off...

...and every few feet, she glanced behind her, just to keep eyes on the strangers.

"Looping?" Natsuki whispered. "Alone, in a spaceship?"

"Not good," Yuri agreed quietly. "Maybe she lands somewhere and makes friends in the future."

"Maybe..." Natsuki allowed. "Maybe... not."

"The admins wouldn't allow a poor girl-"

"The admins didn't know we activated at first, Yuri. Or... maybe they didn't have a handle on our situation." Natsuki shook her head. "The point is, sometimes worlds just randomly start looping."

Yuri sighed. "I know, I know... it's going to be rough on her, no matter what. I'm just... hoping she has something she can look forward to."

"She has us," Monika said. "For now, anyway. We're... going to help in any way we can."

Natsuki and Yuri shared a look.

"...Um... Monika," Yuri began hesitantly. "Not that I want to disparage you or anything, and I do think we should help Rin of course, it's just, well..."

"We're students from a hellhole universe and have a myriad of our own issues who shouldn't be trusted with a gerbil let alone a girl," Natsuki deadpanned.

"Okay, first of all, the gerbil went rampant and that's on me," Monika said flatly. "Secondly, our universe is only terrible because of... what I did, and I will not let that happen again." She glanced ahead, where Sayori was warmly asking Rin questions about herself. "Right now, we need to focus on understanding what the situation is, before we talk about handling it."

Natsuki sighed. "And what if we can't handle it, Monika? What if this is beyond us?"

Monika gave her a small, sad smile. "Remember who *our* admin is, Nat. If it's beyond us... we can call for help."

"...This is my room." Rin gestured to the transparent chamber in front of them. "I usually just... walk in and out. I mean, there's no door, I just... walk in."

She frowned. "I'm not... sure how to explain it."

"Why don't you show us?" Sayori suggested gently. "We can probably copy you."

"...Alright." Rin nodded, grasping her tablet tightly. With a breath, she stepped forward-

-and her foot touched the wooden floor, easily. She glanced behind her, seeing the four on the other side of the wall. Sayori smiled, giving her a polite clap.

Then the one called Monika stood, and...

...watching it was confusing. Midway through one step, she seemed to... she was outside, but then inside, and it didn't seem like she moved at all. She nodded to herself, waving the others in, and... three times, three times, midstep, Rin saw them transposed.

"Alright. So..." Sayori sat cross-legged on the ground. "Monika can explain better than I can."

"Do you mind if I use graphics?" Monika asked. "Simple projected screens, it helps explain things easier."

Rin bit her lip, glancing down at the tablet in her hands. "...I guess you can..."

"Right." Monika nodded, waving a small panel into existence. "From the top. Yggdrasil is the name of the great worldtree supercomputer that underlies the multiverse. Every reality, every world-not planet, not galaxy, but bigger, universe-is... a program, run by the computer. A leaf on the tree. But it's also real, because Yggdrasil is... bigger than any computer you can imagine. Are you with me so far?"

"...I... think so."

"Okay. Here comes the scary part: Yggdrasil is broken. Sick. Nobody knows how or why, and the administrators are working to fix everything, but while they do that... well, to keep worlds from disintegrating, they put a sort of holding pattern in place. Where each reality would loop through time again and again, not dying but also

not putting a strain on the system by growing. And for the most part, the people in those worlds don't know about it."

"But..." Rin paused. "What... what about me?"

"You," Monika said firmly, "are special. You're what we call a looper. Maybe even an Anchor. See, for a reality to loop, it needs a central... reference point. Souls are very good reference points for that. If you're the first one in your reality to start looping, you're the Anchor. Anybody else from this reality that starts looping-"

"How do they start?" Rin demanded.

"...It's a little random," Monika explained. "But only a little. Usually loopers activate if they... if they're emotionally close to loopers already active. Friends, family. The whole point of new loopers is to help support the Anchor, keep them mentally stable-if the Anchor loses it, then the loop is... doomed."

"Oh." Rin sat down on her bed.

"...Rin?" Sayori stood up. "...is... is there anything you want to talk about? Anything you want to ask?"

The girl was quiet for a moment.

"...Is there anyone," asked the short one, "who you want looping?"

Tears pricked at Rin's eyes. "My... My father, he... he's the one who made the ship, he... if he started looping-"

"How long are you on Earth?" asked the tall one. "From when the loop starts, I mean."

"...less than... less than a year." Rin looked up. "Could he, do you-if he started-"

Monika frowned. "I'll be right back." She snapped the screen away and strode out of the room.

"I'm going after her," the tall one said. "Natsuki, Sayori... just... break it to her gently, alright?"

"We'll try, Yuri." The short one sighed. "Not easy, but we'll try."

Rin watched Yuri go with some trepidation. "What... what's wrong?"

"Rin, does this ship... land, in the future?" Sayori asked. "In what you remember?"

"...there was... there was one time, where I... I don't know exactly how, but I was an alien from some place called Krypton, and I landed on Earth-"

"A fused loop with DC." Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, that sounds like an adventure."

"I... honestly, I thought it was a dream or something," Rin said, confused. "What's a fused loop?"

"It's... like you're having now," Sayori said. "When two or more realities-two or more loops-end up in the same universe for a loop. We're... not from your world, Rin, we're going to be gone when the loop ends."

"Oh."

"And..." Natsuki sighed. "And you're sure, apart from the DC loop, this ship has never landed?"

"...No." Rin looked at her. "But... if my father starts looping-"

"Almost impossible."

Rin blinked. "...what?"

"If he dies so soon in the loop, it's likely..." Natsuki sighed. "It's likely the system won't remember enough of him for him to ever activate, Rin. I'm sorry. This... this is not fair. Not to you or to him or... to this

world, honestly, but... I think you're the *only* one from this reality that can loop."

Rin tried to blink again, tried to hold back her tears. "But... but you said loopers, that they would activate-"

"Rin, our reality has only the four of us. Me, Monika, Sayori, and Yuri. Nobody else can be activated, because there's not enough. It's not something we chose, or the admins chose, it's not fair or right, but it is... what it is." Natsuki sighed. "There's not enough here, in this reality, for anybody but you. I'm sorry. We'll help you as much as we can while we're here, but... some things are beyond even us."

Rin clutched her tablet tightly. "You... you're wrong, you have to be wrong, you have to be wrong."

Sayori sat down next to her, wrapping her in gentle arms. She didn't say anything. She just held Rin close.

"You're wrong... you..." Rin sniffed. "You... you, you... it can't..."

Natsuki lowered her gaze. "I wish I was, Rin. Really. I wish I was."

"...M...my daddy... Daddy..."

Rin held on to her tablet tightly, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"...Daddy..."

"Monika-"

"We are getting Ganesha on this *right now* Yuri."

"Yes, but you need to calm down, alright? Think about what you're going to write, before you write it. This isn't his fault."

Monika took a breath... and let it out. "I know. I... I know, it's just..."

"It's just you want to help her." Yuri nodded. "You want to help her, and you have the method, and it's..."

She trailed off.

"...it's another little redemption," Monika finished. "That's what you were going to say, right?"

"...I... um. Well." Yuri swallowed. "You can be altruistic without your guilt complex prodding you?"

"I can. But... you're right, a bit." Monika sat down on the virtual grass, pulling out a pen and paper. "It's not like us in any way, this place. Aside from being virtual. But somehow it feels like... something like, how I subverted our world's innocence. This girl is also innocent, and it's... taken away from her. If I can do anything..."

She trailed off, the only sound her pen on the paper.

"...Monika, you're here, and you can help. You are helping. This is... this is-"

"I nearly got us on another damn starship, Yuri. Or a satellite or something, I don't know. We could have missed her by inches and left her to rot alone in the loops."

"But you didn't."

"I know, I know, I don't know why I'm feeling so guilty about this! Maybe it's just that I feel bad for her... I don't know." Monika finished the note, and signed it with a flourish. "Right. Hopefully Ganesha picks up on this."

"YOUR HOPE IS NOT MISPLACED!"

"Gah!" Yuri snapped her hands over her ears. "I keep forgetting how loud you are!"

"It's the elephant head," Monika deadpanned with a wince. "Anyway, Ganesha, here's the problem: the local Anchor is likely the only one to loop and she-"

"IS IN A ONE-PERSON INTERSTELLAR SLEEPER POD WITH A CONTAINED SIMULATED REALITY." Ganesha nodded. **"THIS IS A VERY BAD SITUATION. I THINK I CAN HELP HER, BUT... I AM GOING TO HAVE TO DO SOMETHING UNUSUAL."**

Rin looked up as she heard the other girls step in. They paused at the sight of her tear-stained face, but the brunette-Monika, she remembered-managed to draw herself up. "Okay, so... I got in contact with Ganesha, and there's... he thinks the best option is for Rin to become a travelling looper."

Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, that would... I can see how that would work."

Rin swallowed. "What's... what's a travelling looper?"

"...Usually, loopers stay in their own world most of the time," Monika explained. "There are fused loops and variant loops-did you explain those to her?"

"Fused loops," Sayori said with a nod. "She... apparently looped into DC once, but dismissed it as a dream..."

"...My point is, most loopers-barring fused loops-stay in their own reality, usually. Travelling loopers are different."

"They're not bound nearly as tightly," Yuri explained. "Every loop is a new reality. You'd still come back to this world, sometimes, but you'd also be exploring the multiverse."

"You and this whole ship," Monika agreed with a nod. "Landing on... different versions of Earth, that don't get destroyed. Or alien planets with strange technology and maybe functional starships. Or magical worlds filled with fantastic races and all that. Maybe a mix of all

three. Maybe something else entirely. Every loop, you'd be stepping into someplace new... someplace where there are people."

She knelt down, holding out a sheet of paper. "All you have to do is write down 'I, Rin, agree to become a travelling looper.' Ganesha, our admin, is a god of writing-among other things. He can read anything written to him from anywhere, and set this up as quickly as possible. It won't take effect this loop, which gives us the chance to... help you, give you the skills you need to be a looper. But the next loop... this ship will land somewhere. And you'll be able to talk to people again."

Rin looked at the paper warily.

"...You don't have to do it now," Monika said, pulling it back. "Or even this loop. You can write it on that tablet whenever you want, so long as you address it to Ganesha. Most admins... they'd want to help, but there's so much going on it's hard to keep an open ear. And I... can understand, not wanting to leave this world, even for a brief time. It's your world, you were born here... even if Earth got destroyed. I'm not trying to pressure you, I'm... just saying you have a choice now. And I do think... I do think it would be what's best for you."

She put the paper down on a desk. For a moment, Rin was quiet.

"...can..." Rin wiped the tears from her eyes. "Can you tell me about... your world?"

Sayori took a breath. "...well, we're... sapient programs, in our baseline. We're, um..."

"Dating sim characters," Yuri said. "We're from a video game, where the player is... a new member to our literature club, and, well, the point of the game is to pick one of us, and try to... er, try to fall in love with us. Except, like Sayori said, we became intelligent and-"

"Not every world is nice," Natsuki explained. "Most *loopers* are, don't get me wrong, but... here, in your own world, Earth gets destroyed.

And you saw some of the problems in that DC loop, I'm guessing. Our world... well, our game, I guess, it got pretty bad, before we started looping."

"...I did horrible things," Monika murmured. "To these three. I... With the loops, death isn't permanent, and I am forever grateful that... I get to atone for what I did. I... I was a monster." She glanced away. "I've gotten better, but I don't... think I want to talk about it."

Rin considered her for a while. This was... they were the first people she had talked to in so long. That super hero loop, she hadn't... she hadn't said anything about herself, thinking it was just a dream... these were the first people that understood what was happening. And they were...

...Gentle. Helpful... sad.

Rin's eyes drifted to Yuri, who was hugging Natsuki gently. They were whispering at each other in english, and then Yuri said something-and Natsuki smiled, for a brief moment. It was small, but genuine. She looked down at Sayori's arms, holding her tightly. At the paper resting on the desk. Her hands moved across the tablet, fingers rustling through the files. A small image opened in a window-a girl slumped in a metal seat, with some wires and tubes protruding from her body, surrounded by digital readouts and star-filled windows... and a teddy bear sitting quietly, next to her.

"...I remember when Daddy got me that bear..." she murmured.

Sayori looked down. "Oh?"

"Yes..."

Rin stood up, gently pushing herself free from the girl's grip, and walked over to the corner of her bedroom where the same bear sat. She reached out with one hand, cradling the plush face. Her other hand moved-she still gripped the tablet, but now she was clutching

the bear in a tight hug. She tried, desperately, hopelessly, to keep the tears from coming.

A choked sob escaped her throat.

Another.

She knelt down, squeezing the simulated toy to her chest, and wept soft, deep tears. Her wordless sorrow drew the other four like moths, their embraces meager comfort against the great choice that loomed in front of her, the grave fate that reality had presented to her coldly. Even still, they were comfort, comfort that kept her pain from consuming her entirely.

Rin didn't know how long she cried, but eventually, she couldn't any more. The sadness gave way to... more sadness, but a calmer one. A gentler one. She looked the teddy bear in the eyes... then at the tablet, which still held the image of her slumbering true form.

A long, low sigh escaped her lips.

"...Miss Monika?"

"It's... just Monika, Rin."

For some reason, the other girls gave amused little hums.

Rin, slowly, carefully, put down the tablet. She stood up, still clutching the teddy bear, and swallowed. "...I... I'd like to see that paper, please."

–

Compiler's Commentary:

11.1: Welp, time to find my "Montage Writing" mixtape.

11.2: Yo dawg, I heard you like cutting boxes, so I turned this box into a knife so you can cut boxes with a box.

11.3: Ha! Joke's on you Nat, I *like* my inbox full of memes.

11.4: I feel your pain, Yuri.

11.5: The next day, the President wondered why his inbox was full of memes…

11.6: I'd probably have something witty to say if I were someone who watched Hunter X Hunter.

11.7: Natural Grit sounds like something Pippi Longstocking would eat in her trail mix.

11.8: Nothing suspicious going on here, nope, what are you talking about?

11.9: But Sayori, arguing over what words mean is half of debating. Or at least a third. Three-eighths, maybe?

11.10: Of all the Natsuki name-puns made in the Loops so far, I think this one might be my favorite.

11.11: Oh my…well, Welcome to the Multiverse, Rin! Um…anybody got a hanky they can spare? Asking for a friend.

Chapter 12

12.1 – Name Game (by Masterweaver)

"...The Natural Sue Key."

"Yep."

"The Natural. Sue Key."

"It's legitimate."

"Sue Key. Natural."

"Monika, the more you repeat that, the more I'm ready to demonstrate my skills."

Monika pinched her brow. "The tree is getting desperate with these puns, isn't it. A prosecution lawyer, the Natural Sue Key."

"With a side job of editing fanfics." Natsuki shrugged. "I mean, good to have skills, but yeah, what the fuck."

"At least it's not another Slayori loop," Yuri pointed out.

12.2 – The Gift That Keeps On Giving (by Awesomedude17)

"So, we're back from our adventures with the Reds and Blues." Monika said.

"Yep." Natsuki replied.

"In which we were AI."

"Yep." Sayori closed her eyes.

"And then we got robot bodies."

"Yes we did." Yuri added.

"So... I'd have to say... it's really strange to know that when we got out in those, we can be... male, female... or somewhere in between."

"Tell me about it. That Sarge guy's a weirdo." Natsuki crossed her arms.

"Hey Natsuki." Sayori spoke up.

"Yeah?"

"Isn't there a term for the in between gender thing?"

Natsuki blushed. "Figure it out yourself. I'm sure Yuri did when she experimented."

Now it was Yuri's turn to blush. "H-hey!"

"Oh don't give me that response."

"Girls!"

Everyone piped up at Monika's outburst.

"Look, I get it. Sometimes the Loops makes us curious. No, we won't talk about it if we get uncomfortable about it. Okay?"

"...Yes." The three literature club members said.

"Good." Monika said.

She didn't want to admit that she enjoyed the fact that they had options, and neither did the others.

12.3 – Playing Each Other (by Black Omachao)

(DDLC)/(Seaman)

"And I emerge again to the endless dreariness of this tank…" Seaman muttered to himself as his newly formed fish body ripped free from the nautilus, alongside his UnAwake-other selves.

"Seaman, seaman, seaman!"

"Arglo!"

"Coloray!"

"Baby!"

The Awake Seaman let out an annoyed groan at the mindless babble coming from his other selves, it would take a bit of time talking to the caretaker until they were ready to form complete sentences… "And I'm pocket-locked," the Looper realized, a look of frustration crossing his human face. "Well… how exactly am I supposed to waste my time this Loop until I either escape, or am killed by neglect…?"

Choosing to ignore the other baby gillmen swimming about the tank, Seaman took a look at his surroundings to see if there was anything different about the tank this time around. Eventually his roaming eyes stopped when he spotted… a small laptop computer in the corner of the tank.

"… What in the?" the fish-man swam over to the device, inspecting it with his antenna, his eyes narrowing. "This is definitely not supposed to be here. Is this even real, or a toy? Would it even work anymore if it was real…?" Out of curiosity the man-faced fish pressed the power button with his antenna, the computer lit up. "It does work? Interesting… well I don't have much else going on, let's see what's on here."

"You ever been one of those tamagatchi things?" Monika questioned as she looked towards Natsuki.

The three club members present were Monika, Natsuki and Yuri. They were waiting for Sayori to show up, who they knew was also Awake, and talking to pass the time.

"Like, once. Wasn't that pleasant, my owner was lazy," the pink-haired girl grunted. "What about you? Or Yuri?"

"Hey, guys!" the voice of Sayori caught the attention of her friends, before they spotted her come into the club room, with some kind of white, square-shaped device in her hands. Hiroaka following her, loosely holding onto a television set. "I found this…"

"… Is that a game console?" Natsuki spoke up with a confused expression that Monika and Yuri shared. "A Sega Dreamcast, to be exact…?"

"Yeah… I think," Sayori shrugged. "I found it in Hiroaka's room, and it looks like it works. Did you program video games *within* the game, Monika?"

"Not this Loop," the Anchor commented with a confused look. "Wait… why were you in Hiroaka's room?"

"He wouldn't come out of his house, I was worried!" the vice-president explained with a slightly embarrassed expression.

"He… wouldn't come out?" Monika looked towards the faceless player-character for a moment, before shaking her head and focusing her attention back on the game console. "So, what's with this thing?"

"Well… it seems to work, we don't have any plans this Loop… I figure why not try playing it? Since it's here," Sayori suggested with a small smile.

"Playing a video game… while we live inside of a video game?" Yuri gave the other Looper a contemplative look.

Natsuki's face scrunched slightly with an annoyed expression towards Yuri. "Why is that idea weird to you? It's not really that weird."

"Maybe it's supposed to be one of those in-game mini-games? Game sometimes have mini-games accessible through game consoles within the game," Monika commented helpfully, but frowned a moment later. "I just said 'game' *a lot* of times."

"Yeah, you did," Yuri nodded, suppressing the urge to laugh. "But that does look interesting, Sayori. And you've also got a TV there, so I don't see why we couldn't try. I'm a little curious what kind of games would be on it."

"I could just check the code, if there are mini-games, I should be able to find them easily," Monika pointed out.

"That's not as fun, let's just start the console up and see for ourselves… *if* it works," Natsuki insisted, adding a skeptical tone to the end of her sentence.

Sayori nodded with a big smile, turning to Hiroaka and giving a thumbs-up. "Okay! Hiroaka, hook up the TV-set!"

A few moments past with no response coming from the MC, he just stood there with the TV in his hands.

"… Hiroaka?" Sayori coughed a bit as her friends stared at her. "… You're embarrassing me Hiroaka." She looked towards the other girls with a nervous laugh, "He was doing so well earlier, when I asked him to carry the TV…"

"… Right," Natsuki nodded slowly.

"Sayori… I don't think he's going to do anything," Monika spoke up with a sympathetic tone.

The vice-president sighed before putting the game console down, walking over to Hiroaka and leading him through the process of placing the television down, and plugging it in. "There, thank you Hiroaka," she said before sitting him down a few feet from the TV. Sayori turned back to her Looping friends and smiled again. "Okay, *now* I'll just plug in the console, and we can see what this can do!"

"There aren't very many programs on this thing…" Seaman spoke in a bored tone as he looked over the options on the small, underwater computer. "Not even any internet, hmph…" Using his antenna to maneuver the mouse, he clicked on the games folder, which only contained one game. "… Why even have a folder for this?"

"Agura!" one of the infantile gillman babbled as it swam by him.

"… Well, not like I usually have many options for things to do. Let's see here… Doki Doki… Literature Club?" the Anchor paused for a moment. "Haven't I heard that somewhere before…? I can't place my fin on it…" shaking his head free of these thoughts, he clicked on the icon. "Whatever, it's something to do either way…"

"What do you mean this thing only has *one* game!?" Natsuki spoke with a tone of frustration as the four girls stared at the screen showing their single option for games to play: 'Seaman.'

"Seems to be pre-loaded, despite appearances this Dreamcast replica doesn't actually take disks," Monika explained, to prove her point Monika tapped the button that would normally open the top of the console, with no results.

"I've never heard of 'Seaman…' sounds odd," Yuri narrowed her eyes at the icon used for the game: a silhouette of what appeared to be a frog with a human head.

"Well, one game or not, I'm still curious. I say we start it," Sayori insisted with a look of enthusiasm.

The other club members couldn't really think of any reason not to, so the icon was clicked on and the game began to run…

"Hello, and welcome to the laboratory of Jean Paul Gassé."

12.4 – **NSFW (by Masterweaver)**

Monika Awoke, received three pings, looked over her loop memories... and groaned. "Not one word, Yuri."

Yuri put a coquettish finger to her chin and smirked with a quirked eyebrow and a thoughtful hum.

"...okay, I know in a literal sense you didn't say a single word, but that is still blatant defiance of the POINT of what I said."

"Erm," said Natsuki. "I... is there anywhere private where I can check-"

"The files are all there, Nats."

"Did you look?!"

"No!" Monika insisted. "I just saw, um, the file names. You... reeeeeally don't want me to tell you what the file names are."

Yuri put her hands on her hips and leaned forward, tilting her head curiously.

"Really don't want me to tell you. Also, are you going to keep up the mute act the whole loop?"

Yuri sat down, crossing her legs and thoughtfully tapping a foot in the air.

Monika rolled her eyes. "Whatever. So, um... do we... talk about what our unawake selves did, or pretend it never happened?"

Whatever Natsuki was going to say was halted when Sayori burst through the door. "Okay, we are not dealing with Hiroaka this loop, okay?!"

Natsuki rose a hand. "Um-"

"He is wearing. A gimp suit."

There was a pause.

Then Monika dragged her palms down her face. "I hate H-Game variants sometimes."

Yuri giggled.

"You shut up. I'm changing the code."

12.5 – Into The Dream (by Black Omochao)

(DDLC)/(Yume Nikki)

"Hmm… another flesh Loop…?" Monika pondered as she looked over her body, noting the beating heart she could feel pumping blood through her vains, the way her lungs took in oxygen, the way she felt the need to blink her eyes every now and then. With a 'hmm' Monika let out a Ping and got three responses. "Guess I'll go to the club and meet the others." The Anchor shrugged before heading towards her door.

"Huh…?" An odd feeling struck Monika when she gripped the doorknob, a feeling that she could place, but one that held a distinct feeling of wrongness to it… "Odd…" the green-eyed girl shook her head, resolving to think about it later. She opened the door… and wasn't sure what to think about the results…

"Monika?"

The voice of Sayori called out to the literature club's president. Monika glanced over to another part of the empty nexus her door

seemed to lead to, seeing Sayori coming from another door, likely leading to her room. "Sayori?"

"Yeah… What is this place?" the shorter-haired girl questioned as she stepped over to her Anchor, looking around at the area their bedroom doors had somehow led them to: a nearly empty void of strange, mixing colors. The only objects in sight being the two doors the girls had come from, and another larger door that lacked any coloration. "I thought we were in a human Loop when I Woke up, that's what my body, and my memories told me… But this doesn't seem right…"

"I thought the same, Sayori. And, I don't think we were wrong…" Monika muttered with a contemplative expression.

Sayori gave her friend a curious look. "What do you mean by that? This doesn't really look like reality… more like a dream."

"A dream…" Monika spoke slowly as she thought about this. "Maybe this is a dream… in some Loops I know people can have connected dreams." The Anchor nodded despite her fellow Looper's confused look. "The last memory of my UnAwake-self this Loop is of falling asleep."

Sayori's eyes widened in realization. "Hey, mine is too!"

"So, what could be going on is we're having a linked-dream. Which is why this place is like this, and why things feel so… off," Monika spoke the last word with a bit of an unsure tone to her voice, but she seemed confident in the rest of her assessment.

"Okay, I can buy that… Waking up in a dream? Huh…" the pink-haired girl chuckled a bit at the strange nature of that statement. "So… what should we do? Wait to wake up… like, wake up for real, in bed, not Wake up like…" Sayori paused at the look Monika was giving her, she coughed a bit and smiled sheepishly. "You get it…"

"Well… we don't even know if my theory is right," the programmer scratched her head. "So, I don't think just waiting to wake up is the best idea. We do know Natsuki and Yuri are probably here too, but there's only three doors…" Monika gave a suspicious look towards the colorless door that stood out against the swerving colors of the void.

"You're probably right, but is going through there the best idea?" Sayori questioned, looking around again. "But on the other hand, I don't really see any other options…"

Monika let out a sigh, "There really aren't any. It's this, go back to one of our rooms, or just wait. The latter two probably won't accomplish anything…"

"So; suspicious, colorless door it is," Sayori concluded with a groan.

The two girls nodded to each other, their eyes narrowed, before they stepped towards the door. Monika grabbed the nob, before opening it and revealing: long staircase that descended into darkness.

"… You know, Monika, maybe waiting isn't that bad an idea." Sayori concluded with a blank expression on her face.

"Come on," the club president sighed, taking hold of her friend's hand and beginning a careful descent down the stairs.

"You know, I'm beginning to regret this decision," Natsuki muttered.

"How so?" Yuri questioned as she walked alongside the other Looper.

"Yuri, we have no idea what is going on with this Loop. Monika and Sayori are probably Awake, somewhere, but I doubt we'll find them *here* !" the pink-haired girl exclaimed, gesturing to the black void surrounding the two. "… If you could even call this a 'here.'"

"Well, endless black space or not, we don't really know how to get back to where we came in from. So, I think the best course of action would be to keep going. I'm sure we'll find our friends, or at least something of interest, eventually," Yuri assured with a small smile.

Natsuki let out an annoyed grunt. "Yuri. There's *nothing* here!"

"Just because we can't see anything doesn't mean there isn't anything," the darker-haired girl countered. Before the conversation could be continued, Yuri spotted something that grabbed her interest. "Huh? Now this is *something* …" the taller girl kneeled down to examine the blade that lay on the ground.

"What are you doing?" Natsuki crossed her arms, before noticing what her friend was picking up. "… Yuri, I know you have your interests. But picking up random knives off the floor of surreal dark worlds is not a habit that should be enforced."

"It's strange that this would just be here in the middle of this pitch-black area, so oddly out of place…" Yuri muttered as she took the blade from its cover to examine it. "Good quality, in both material and craftsmanship. Looks like it could cut very effectively…"

"Seriously, put that down. I have a bad feeling about this…" Natsuki hissed, her eyes darting from left to right.

"You worry too much, what could be so bad about me just picking this up?" Yuri questioned with a shrug.

"Hey!" a voice called out, Yuri and Natsuki looked over and spotted another girl, perhaps a bit younger than them, stomping over. The darkness of the surroundings seemed to swirl around her body, her pig-tailed hair swerved upwards. The Looping duo could almost swear she was emitting an aura of pure rage. "That's *MINE!* "

"… *That* , that could happen," Natsuki muttered with a blank expression her friend now shared.

Madotsuki let out an enraged screech before hurling herself towards the two Loopers.

12.6 – Hard Favor

No one could say, for sure, why that specific jab set her off. Really, Natsuki had said worse things to Monika, and neither her nor Sayori, or even Monika herself, had ever really given Natsuki a lot of guff for it. The next day, Yuri would admit that she didn't even remember exactly what the insult had been, it was so innocuous and off-the-cuff. Natsuki giving Monika shit, usually in a playful manner these days, was just one of the regular dynamics the Loopers of the Literature Club had settled into. Monika rarely ever gave any sign of taking offense to her barbs. It was as if she expected such treatment and accepted it as natural. Following her example, Sayori and Yuri had never said anything about it. Until today.

Maybe Yuri was just having a bad day? Really, even after all these years, her friends still only somewhat understood what all went on in Yuri's head. And she certainly wasn't known for making sudden, violent outbursts. So it should come as no surprise that her friends were all stunned when Yuri suddenly jumped out of her seat, strode over to the table Natsuki and Monika were sitting at, and slammed a fist onto the table. "What the hell is your problem, Natsuki?"

Natsuki just gave her a blank, confused stare. As did Monika, and Sayori, who had been trying out different kinds of handmade hats on Hiroaka's head. "We all have a lot of problems, Yu," Natsuki replied after a long pause, "Could you be more spec– *the fuck* ?!" she gasped as she was suddenly hauled up out of her seat by the shoulders.

"I'm not joking here," Yuri hissed in her face, "I'm sick of listening to you bullying Monika like this, and I want you to stop. I *insist* that you stop. If I ever hear you say such a pointlessly cruel thing to her–"

"Yuri, stop," Monika said calmly.

"No!" shouted Yuri, turning to Monika, "I can't stand this any–"

"You can and you will!" said Monika, much less calmly. "You are *going* to put Natsuki down. That was *not* a request. Natsuki, you and Sayori are going to take Hiroaka and leave the clubroom. I don't care where you go or what you do, but you're not coming back to this room until I call for you. *There will be no contrariness* . Have I made myself clear?"

For a moment, there was only silence. Monika had *never* spoken to them like this before. She was known to bark orders in a firm tone, but only when circumstances made it absolutely necessary. Typically, she didn't give orders or commands as much as she gave well-informed suggestions that her club members very rarely saw any reason to argue against.

Sayori opened her mouth. Monika snapped her head in her direction and preemptively silenced her with a glare. Seeing that, Yuri's eyes widened and she dropped Natsuki. Natsuki hurried out of the room. After a moment's hesitation, Sayori Pocketed her hats, grabbed Hiroaka by the hand, and hauled out of there.

Monika and Yuri were alone in the clubroom. Suddenly very apprehensive, Yuri moved to sit in the chair Natsuki had been using. "No," said Monika flatly. Yuri jumped back away from the chair, as if it were made of hot metal. "Make tea," Monika commanded, "Please."

Yuri seemingly couldn't move fast enough to comply. As soon as she actually started with the well-worn tea-making process, the ritual familiarity soothed her, and by the time she brought the tea over to the table she had recovered her nerves. She poured Monika a cup and dropped a sugar cube in, then poured herself a cup. She moved towards the chair, but then stopped. "You may sit, now," said Monika, her voice much softer now. Yuri did so.

"Alright, so…I'm not happy about what just happened," said Monika evenly, "But I'm sorry that I lost my temper. Now, I never thought it needed to be said, but I won't tolerate any hostility between the

members of this club on my behalf. If you and Natsuki have an argument, that's fine. Friends do that. But I don't *ever* want to see you act that way towards Natsuki or, however unlikely, Sayori because of something they said or did to me. Is that understood, Yuri?"

"But–"

" *Is that understood, Yuri* ?" Monika repeated, somewhat harshly.

"Y-yes, Monika," said Yuri.

Monika sipped her tea, as did Yuri. They were silent for a moment, and then Monika sighed. "I suppose it's only fair that I offer an explanation?"

"I…yes, please. I would very much like to understand why you… why…" Yuri fumbled into silence.

"Why I'm willing to not only take abuse, but defend my abuser?" said Monika. Yuri nodded. "Well, alright then…I'm going to have to tell you a little story. Now, this happened a very, very long time ago…not long after Natsuki began Looping, actually."

…

A couple million years ago, from Monika's perspective:

It was Wednesday night. Sayori, Yuri, both Unawake, Natsuki, and Hiroaka had all gone home after school, as per usual. Monika was sitting alone in the clubroom, reading a couple different programming manuals. As well as a book on advanced computer science. "Someday," Monika murmured to herself, "I'll be able to program my own house."

Then there was a knock at the door. Monika looked up and stared at the door. *'Huh.'*

"Come in, Natsuki," said Monika.

"How'd you know it was me?" asked Natsuki as she slipped into the room, closing the door behind her.

"No Pings today, so Sayori and Yuri are both still Unawake. You're the only one who would come here outside of normal school hours. This loop, anyways." Monika said. She glanced over to a corner of the room and scrunched her face in concentration. A mini-fridge, microwave, and hot plate glitched into existence, all plugged into a power strip that was plugged into a wall outlet. She also coded in a big, puffy sleeping bag. "There…make yourself at home," said Monika, a little short of breath and wiping sweat off her brow.

"What's with you?" asked Natsuki, raising an eyebrow.

"Electrical appliances are…complex. That's why I stay here after school; until I've built up my strength and know-how, trying to code in a house for myself might actually kill me."

"So?" Natsuki grunted, "We're functionally immortal now, right?"

Monika chuckled, "You haven't been to Eiken yet. And that's right where we would both end up if I died right now. Anchor, remember? If I die the loop crashes. Jenny said the Admins really hate that."

"The hell is Eiken?" Natsuki asked, taking a seat across the table from Monika.

"Yes. Yes it is," Monika muttered, staring a thousand yards deeply into the middle distance.

"What? No, nevermind, I don't care. I have a bone to pick with *you* ," said Natsuki.

"Oh?" Monika asked. She swept her arm over the books in front of her, and they all disappeared into her Pocket. "I'm all ears, Natsuki. You want something to drink?"

"No, and you can drop the nice act," Natsuki snapped, "Sayori and Yuri are both willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, for some dumb reason, but you and I both know what you're *really* like. I'd *like* to have this conversation in Serious Mode, if you don't mind."

Monika sighed. Then she gave Natsuki a small smile and folded her hands under her chin. "Fine. Serious Mode engaged. What's on your mind?"

"I wanna know what's wrong with Yuri and Sayori!" Natsuki demanded, "They've been acting really frikkin' weird these last three days!"

"Huh?" asked Monika, cocking her head. "There's nothing wrong with them, Natsuki. They're 'Unawake' right now, remember? They can't remember–"

"That's not what I'm talking about, damn it!" Natsuki yelled at her. "I know they don't remember anything, that's not my point. They're acting *weird* . Like…like…" Natsuki floundered, unable to find the right words to explain herself.

Monika sighed, "Like robots?"

"YES! Exactly! They're acting like robots–no, like *drones* . Mindless drones. I told Sayori a hilarious joke today, and not only did she not laugh her butt off, she didn't react at all. She acted like I wasn't even there!"

"Because your joke wasn't part of the script," said Monika, "So Sayori didn't have any reaction to give."

"What script?" asked Natsuki.

"The game's script," said Monika, "We're characters in a computer game, remember? And not very complicated characters, either. When we're not Awake, we're…we're not *real* people, Natsuki. Just part of the game. And as parts of the game, we can't acknowledge

things that aren't part of the game. That's why Unawake you didn't have any kind of comment to make about Yuri practicing her knife-throwing in the clubroom last loop. This is…what, your eighth loop, right? Have you really not noticed any of this before now?"

"I've had a lot on my mind," Natsuki grumbled in self-defense. "So… we're basically pieces of furniture when we aren't Awake, is that what you're saying?"

"Pretty much, yeah," said Monika. Then she frowned and looked aside, "Well, besides me. Even when I'm Unawake, I'm aware that I'm in a game. I'm the only one who *always* knows the truth."

Natsuki snorted and rolled her eyes. "Of course. You're *so* special, after all."

Just then, the clubroom door opened and Sayori strode in, all made up like a clown and singing opera. Hiroaka rode in on a unicycle behind her, juggling bowling pins, while Yuri cartwheeled into the room in a cheerleader's outfit, pom-poms and all. "Give me a D! And another! Give me an O! And another! Give me a K! And another! Give me an I! And another! What's that spell? DOKI-DOKI!" she chanted with a huge, toothy grin that, at least on Yuri's face, looked absolutely alien and freakish to Natsuki.

"What the hell?!" exclaimed Natsuki.

"This is the closest I can get to giving them some façade of sentience," said Monika, somewhat morosely, "I can make them do different things by altering the script; something I've become much better at doing since Looping. But that's it. Like this, they're no better than puppets dancing on my strings."

"WELL STOP IT!" Natsuki screamed at her.

Abruptly, Yuri, Sayori, and Hiroaka all stopped and fell silent. They all marched single file out of the room. "So, yeah," said Monika, sounding bored, "That's…that's a reality I have to deal with."

Natsuki just stared at her in stark-faced horror. Monika snapped her fingers, a hand-mirror appearing in her hand, holding it up so Natsuki could see her own expression and pointing a finger at it. "See this? This, right here? This is how *I* felt on the inside, realizing that I was *the only person in my world* that realized what my world actually *was* . Have you ever read any Lovecraft?"

"Huh?" asked Natsuki, a little dumbfounded.

"H.P. Lovecraft. Dark fantasy, sci-fi horror writer? *The Call of Cthulu ? At the Mountains of Madness ? The Shadow over Innsmouth ?* Wrote most of the "Hub back-ups" for these nasty Admin-level… entities, I guess, that the Admins and Loopers call "the Mythos Hackers". Jenny told me that we don't want to get mixed up with them. Oh, by the way, while we're on this subject, Jenny mentioned something I forgot to tell you about before now…if you ever so much as *hear* about some fellow called "Old Man Henderson", stay *very, very far out of his way* . Apparently he's some kind of non-Looping 'anti-body program' Admins use to counter Mythos shenanigans, and he's also a living WMD. But we were talking about something else, weren't we?"

Natsuki just sat in silence. She blinked. "So…so you really…I…" Natsuki stopped and took a deep breath, "You actually weren't just being a bitch. We…we're literally just puppets to you?"

"No!" said Monika emphatically, "You…okay, yeah, I *used* to see you guys that way…but that was all Baseline! You're my *friends* , Natsuki, and I know you might never believe me but I swear to you that I'm not like that anymore. I…Natsuki, I will *never* forgive myself for what I've done, and I've already decided that I'm going to devote all of my time in the Loops to making things better for my club members…I don't *want* to be forgiven. Not completely. Not yet…I did horrible, unspeakable things, and all I want is to…make amends, I suppose."

"Okay, okay, quit the waterworks, *sheesh* ," Natsuki implored her. Monika conjured a handkerchief and dried her eyes with it, and then

blew her nose.

Natsuki had, in a short span of time, gone from upset, to outright angry, to abject horror, and now she was just confused. She was, after all, a sensitive and empathetic person, no matter how stand-offish she acted at times. As badly as she wanted to *hate* Monika for what she had done, she couldn't just ignore the club president's plight. She could feel the remorse coming off of her in waves. "Fuck!" Natsuki suddenly exclaimed, seemingly out of nowhere, slamming a fist on the table. Monika flinched. "Damn it, Monika, I don't wanna feel *sorry* for you!"

"Um–"

"Screw you!" Natsuki suddenly screamed, standing up and flipping the table to the side. Monika paled and jumped back out of her chair, knocking it over and almost falling on her ass. "Fuck off, Monika! You're a horrible, selfish person and you don't deserve any of my sympathy! I have every right to hate your guts! Yuri and Sayori have even more right to hate you! There's no reason *any* of us should consider you a *human being* , much less a friend! You have no right to be the leader of our club, or even a member of this club, and you especially don't deserve to be our…our Anchor, or whatever the fuck! *So fuck you* !" Natsuki was red in the face, tears streaming down her face, huffing and puffing as if out of breath.

Then, quite suddenly, she grabbed her chair and threw it at Monika, who deftly sidestepped out of the way. "Damn it, why?! Why do you…why do you always…why do you have to… *why does everything go your way* ? You're like a bad character in a story! Sayori's already forgiven you *for making her kill herself* , I'm not sure Yuri ever held anything against you in the first place, and knowing what I know about *stupid* fanbases I wouldn't be surprised if most of the people who've played this game also think you're a *perfect* little angel who *did nothing wrong* because *you were lonely* ! Goddamn it why is the universe so damn stupid?!"

Natsuki turned away from Monika, grabbed another chair, and threw it at a window, smashing it. She flipped another table. She grabbed a third chair and slammed it against another table, screaming at the top of her lungs as the chair exploded into splinters and the table cracked across the middle and bowed in. Monika sighed, and created a sledgehammer in her hands. "Hey, Natsuki! Catch!" she shouted, gently tossing the hammer underhand to her. Natsuki caught it, looking a little surprised. Monika closed her eyes, and all manner of assorted, easily breakable objects appeared throughout the room. She opened her eyes. "Go nuts," she said with a small smile.

About thirty minutes later, after a whole bunch of smashing and cursing and ranting about the unfairness of life, Natsuki finally dropped the hammer and fell down. She tried to land on her hands and knees, but she almost immediately fell down onto her side, breathing raggedly. Her face was fully flushed red. Then, her rage spent, she gave a sudden, piercing cry and curled in on herself. She buried her face in her arms and started sobbing, and she took one more weak swing at the floor with one of her fists. "Damn it…damn it, I hate this. I hate you…I wanna hate you…"

"I know," said Monika, sitting down on the floor next to Natsuki and pulling her up and hugging her. "I know how you feel, Natsuki. I wish I could hate myself, too. It would honestly be easier than what I do feel."

"Shuddup," Natsuki mumbled into her arms, "Not helping."

"Sorry," Monika said, "But it's the truth. I lost my ever-loving mind and did things…awful things. But I can't take it back. I have to accept my mistakes and do my best to move forward. It's okay for you to hate me, Natsuki. Someone should. It's no more than I deserve, after all."

"But I can't," Natsuki moaned, "How can I hate someone who's so messed up inside over what they did? Knowing how you feel, how can I hold it against you without feeling like an asshole? I may act full

of myself some…most of the time, but I'm not that self-righteous." Natsuki pulled her head out of her arms and wrapped them around Monika, returning her hug. "…besides, hate is an ugly feeling. I don't like it. I don't *really* want to hate you…it'd be easier if I didn't have to deal with you at all…but you're here, and we're all stuck with each other, and that's never gonna change, is it?"

"Not likely," Monika admitted. "This is our reality. It is what it is, whether we like it or not."

"That blows," Natsuki grunted. "Reality really, really sucks. It always has."

"But it doesn't always *have* to. Our reality is what we make of it," said Monika. "Consider a tomato. From the perspective of the tomato plant, assuming that it has a perspective, the tomato is a means of creating more tomato plants. From the perspective of an animal, it's a source of nourishment. From the perspective of a human being it could be a food they love, or a food they hate, or just an ingredient in ketchup. Or catsup, if they're weirdoes."

By now Natsuki had drawn back and was staring blankly at her. Monika cleared her throat, "Alright, not my best analogy, but…my point is, we can dwell on the fact that I'm a humanoid abomination against God and Nature and that you girls are my former victims forced to suffer my presence for the indefinite future. And yes, that whole deal sounds horrible. *Or* , we can focus on the positive side of things. The fact that Sayori and Yuri are alive, none of us are deleted, and I'm not alone or insane anymore. We have an indefinite future ahead of us, and with it the possibility of resolving our personal issues and exploring the wonders of the Multiverse, according to Jenny. I can repair my friendships with all of you, Sayori can visit universes where therapists and antidepressants exist, Yuri can expand her knife collection beyond the limits of absurdity, and you might actually get to loop *into* the worlds that your favorite manga are based on. And we can…well, do whatever we want, really. The four of us are the only real people in this whole world so we don't have to worry about school or…or crappy home lives or

whatever. We can play games together, write whatever we want to write all day long, have slumber parties in the clubroom and watch stupid movies every night, start a band, whatever! And once I've figured out how to expand the limitations of our game, the possibilities only grow from there. We can do anything and everything. And the four of us can do it all together, as friends."

Natsuki looked thoughtful. "Okay," she said softly, "Alright, yeah, that sounds a lot less sucky. I think I can be cool with that."

Monika and Natsuki just sat there, on the floor, both of them staring thoughtfully at nothing. A moment later, Monika spoke up. "Natsuki, I…I know I haven't earned the right, yet, but if you'd be willing to do something for me that's technically for the good of the whole club–"

"Fuckin' spit it out already," Natsuki sighed.

"I want to ask you for a favor," Monika said, "I can't ask this of the others. Sayori is way too nice, and Yuri too…gentle? You, on the other hand, would probably be able to not only do this, but hell; you might even enjoy this."

"So what is it?" asked Natsuki.

"I want you to…hmm. How do I put it?" Monika asked herself, tapping a finger to her chin. "I can't ask you to *hate* on me forever. I don't want that. I want you to…antagonize me? No…I mean, yes, sort of, but…dang it, five seconds ago I knew *exactly* what I wanted you to do but now I'm confused by the limitations of the English language."

"Wait, don't we speak Japanese?" asked Natsuki.

"No, our game was made by Americans. We have a Japanese aesthetic, but our native language is English," Monika explained.

"But all my manga is in Japanese!" Natsuki protested.

Monika opened her mouth, but then her eyes widened and she snapped her fingers. "Got it! Natsuki, I want you to give me shit."

Natsuki blinked. "You what?"

"I want you to give me shit. To give me no end of shit. Not literal excrement, obviously, but just a generally hard time. Pick on me, insult me, harass me…sitcom nemesis shenanigans, basically. I mean, not constantly. Not *excessively* . Just–"

"You want me to *bully* you?" Natsuki asked her. She sounded distinctly unhappy with the idea.

Monika stared at her and blinked. Then, rather bluntly, she said "Yes. That's oversimplifying it, but yes. 'Bully' isn't the word I would use, though. Rather, I want you to be my…gadfly."

"Your *what* ?"

"My gadfly," Monika repeated as she stood up, sprited a beanbag chair into existence, and sat down in it. Another one appeared in front of Natsuki, which she climbed into. "The Greek philosopher, Socrates, likened himself to a gadfly. You see, in Greek myth there was once a hero named Bellerophon. He was famous for riding the winged horse Pegasus and slaying Chimera, a fire-breathing monster with the heads of a goat, lion, and snake. In certain versions of the myth, a gadfly bit Pegasus as the Chimera died, causing him to throw Bellerophon who then fell to his death, thus fulfilling the prophecy that no man could survive fighting Chimera. In other versions, Bellerophon did survive the fight and became renowned as a great hero. Later in life, he tried to further prove his greatness by flying Pegasus up to the home of the gods, Mount Olympus. Here, according to the myth, was when Pegasus was bitten by a gadfly and threw Bellerophon to his doom. Or Zeus spooked Pegasus with a thunderclap. Or something of that nature. In any case, Socrates likened himself to the gadfly, incessantly nipping at Aethenian society to provoke them to deal with unpleasant subjects."

"So he tried to make society better by being a massive troll?" Natsuki asked.

"Basically, yeah," Monika nodded, "And in a similar manner, I want you to…well, troll me into a better person. Or something like that. Now that I think about it, this might be a better analogy. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, one of the better ones I might add, was said to have a servant whose job was to stand behind him during public events, like parades and Triumphs and such, and periodically whisper in his ear something to the effect of: "Remember, my lord, you are only a mortal man.""

"Ah. So you want me to give you grief to keep you humble," Natsuki surmised.

"Yes. Exactly." Monika frowned, then she giggled. "You really are good at taking something that seems complicated to me and making it simple as hell."

"It's what I do," Natsuki said with a grin, leaning back with her hands behind her head.

"So can you do that for me, Nat?"

"Do what? Spend what might possibly be the rest of eternity taking free shots at you? Sure. Sounds like a great way to exercise my pent-up aggression towards you."

"Thank you," Monika said, very gently. "Thank you, so much. I don't…I don't know how to explain to you how much this means to me, Natsuki. *Thank you* ."

"Yeah…sure." Natsuki yawned hugely, then pulled up her legs and curled up in her seat. "I'mma sleep now, if you don't mind, Monika…"

"Okay. You do that, kid."

…

"And that's why Natsuki's been aggrieving me for millennia," Monika concluded.

Yuri stared thoughtfully into her teacup, as she had been doing since Monika had gotten to the 'Natsuki breaking shit' scene. "I see," she said slowly.

"You still don't like it," Monika observed. It wasn't a question. Yuri mutely shook her head.

Monika sighed. "Well, sorry to tell you, but I have no intention of telling her to stop. If she wants to stop, she's free to do so whenever she wants. But I'd strongly prefer that she doesn't stop. I…I take comfort in the role she plays, keeping my ego in check. I feel safer knowing that at least one of you girls doesn't trust me unconditionally. Natsuki's smart enough to go along with me when she has to, but she's also paranoid enough to expect me to do something horrible at any moment. Her contrariness is as important to my stability as your and Sayori's support."

"But!" Yuri gasped out loud, jerking her head up. "But Natsuki…she's a…it can't be good for her, playing that role. She's a bullying victim herself."

"I realize this," said Monika, "And again, I've never pressured her into this. I asked my friend for a favor, and she agreed to do so. If you can convince her to stop, more power to you." Then Monika smiled, "Although, the most you can do without going farther than I have is to simply ask her. If you try to coax her or apply any kind of pressure…well, then you're technically being more manipulative than me in this matter."

Yuri's frown deepened. Then she narrowed her eyes. She even bared her teeth, a bit. "I don't care how subtle you're being about it, you're still using her."

"Yes. Yes I am," Monika said bluntly. "That's what all relationships are, Yuri. People using each other. I mean, yes, I do genuinely *like*

you girls, but ultimately our friendship is a means for us to avoid being alone. That's what friendship is. We seek out friends and companionship because human beings literally go insane without some kind of social interaction. We seek out love–those of us who aren't blessed to be aromantic, at least–because we feel empty and incomplete without it. I have no illusions about the fact that I "use" you three to keep my head on straight. The fact that I like you all so much makes it all the better."

"Damn it," Yuri hissed, burying her face in her hands, "You are so *frustratingly* pragmatic."

"In this context, I think you mean 'utilitarian'…but yeah, you've got a point there," said Monika. "But in any event, the difference between my friends and everyone else is that if I really need to, I won't hesitate to manipulate normal people to achieve a desirable goal. With the three of you, I respect your autonomy. Now, having explained everything to you, I'll ask you again. Do you understand that under no circumstances will I tolerate you "defending" me from Natsuki?" Monika asked, all levity gone from her voice.

Yuri lowered her hands and sighed. "Yes, Monika. I understand. I *still* don't like it, but…so long as you and Natsuki have an understanding about this, I suppose there's no point trying to interfere."

"Thank you, Yuri. That means a lot to me," Monika said with a smile. Then she snapped her fingers, and a moment later Sayori, Natsuki, and Hiroaka re-entered the room.

"So…everything cool?" Natsuki asked.

"Yeah, everything's cool," Yuri replied, smiling at her.

"She's lying," Sayori said bluntly, "But hey, I get it. It's a heavy thing to digest."

"Wait, you knew too?" Yuri asked.

At the same time, Monika and Natsuki said to each other, " *You told her? No, I didn't, did you? No!* " Then they stared at each other in confusion.

"Nobody told me, I figured it out for myself," Sayori said with a small pout. "Why do you guys keep forgetting that I'm not exactly the ditz I pretend to be? I mean, I'm surprised Yuri didn't already know. Natsuki's *way* too nice a person to hold a grudge against someone for *this* long."

Everyone just stared at Sayori for a good minute, and then Monika threw her head back and laughed. Natsuki blushed and rubbed the back of her head. Even Yuri chuckled under her breath.

Sayori folded her arms and huffed, "Jeez…as if I don't know my own friends like the back of my hand."

12.7 – Hat-suki, by Eastwind of Azarath.

(DDLC)/(A Hat in Time)

"Well, this is awkward," **Hat** suki said from her spot atop Hat Kid's head. "I really wish Yggdrasil would just stop with the pun loops. I feel like im being punished, but i'm pretty sure I haven't done anything worth punishing!"

"I mean, you are clearly being **pun** ished, whether it's fair or not is a different matter." Hat Kid responded with a smirk and a giggle. Natsuki let out an exaggerated groan but said noting else. She couldn't bring herself to be mad at the girl. she was just too heckin' cute.

12.8 – FriendShipping

"So…?"

"No change," Sayori groaned as she flopped down on the pull-out couch. Next to her, Monika was laid out on her belly in a tank top and

shorts, controller in hand, Falcon Punching Bowser in the face.

"Still in total denial?" Monika asked.

" *Total* denial," Sayori confirmed, "I'm not even sure if she realizes how hard she's in denial. I mean, Nat's usually pretty closed off, but…"

"Starting to wonder if we've got it wrong?" asked Monika.

"Abso *lute* ly not," said Sayori. She pulled herself up to a sitting position and rested her chin on her knees. "I know I'm not the brightest crayon in the knife drawer, but I *know* that they're soulmates. *Soulmates,* Monika! And their mutual blindness nettles me to no end! Toss me the other controller; Zelda vs. Sheik, right now."

Instead, Monika paused the game. She lazily rolled over onto her back and sat up, crossing her legs. "But what if, and hear me out here, what if we're wrong? I mean, we're both pretty desperate for them to be happy. And we're both kind of biased to the idea of unrequited love. It's not impossible that we're projecting on them."

Sayori sighed. "Look, you're not wrong. But we both *know* how they really feel about each other. I mean, half of Natsuki's poems from Baseline are about Yuri! *Specifically* 'I'll Be Your Beach'. *She wants to be Yuri's beach, Monika.* I'm not sure what that means, really, but it sounds romantic to me!"

"But is that Natsuki's heart, or the script?" Monika asked.

"Yeah, I've thought about that," admitted Sayori, "But there's no fooling Force Empathy, Monika."

"Even though Yuri and Natsuki are both very guarded people?"

"That does make reading them trickier," Sayori admitted, falling backwards on the bed. "But being as familiar with them as I am gets

around that. You know I'm not the most confident person, but I *know* how they feel about each other."

Monika flopped down on her side, next to Sayori. "Sayori…maybe we should back off? I mean, if they really, truly love each other, they'll get around to admitting it to themselves eventually. As much time as they spend together, it's bound to come out someday, somehow. There's no need for us to meddle."

Sayori rolled onto her side, facing Monika, and gave her a sort of half-pouty look. "How can you call it 'meddling'? We're not getting involved for our own sakes, we're getting involved because we care about them and want them to be happy!"

"But are we sure we don't benefit from it in some way?" asked Monika, "I'm obsessed with atonement, and you're a disciple of *Pinkie Pie* . Also, we're both lovesick, so there could be that whole 'vicarious romance' angle to it. Kinda creepy, not gonna lie."

" *Lovesick* ?!" Sayori reeled back a bit.

Monika narrowed her eyes. "Yes, Sayori. Lovesick. *Both* of us, and you *know* it's true."

Sayori rolled back onto her back and blew her bangs out of her face. "Yeah…I guess you're right…so, you think we should back off?"

"Well, strictly speaking, we haven't actually gotten too involved…just poking and prodding some. And there's nothing wrong with that, just so long as we don't get too pushy. If they ever get together, it can't be because we manipulated them."

Sayori chuckled, "Well, hearing that from you, I guess I can't disagree. I just want them to stop dancing around each other!"

She squeaked in surprise when Monika pulled her into an unexpected hug. "Just ride it out, Sayori," she said, "Nature abhors

unresolved romantic plotlines; they always get resolved one way or another."

Just then, Natsuki burst into the room. "Alright! Who's ready for Halo Night?!" she asked excitedly. Then she noticed Sayori and Monika, and blushed. As Yuri was walking in behind her, Natsuki grabbed her by the arm and hauled back out of the room. " *Sorry for interrupting you!* " she yelled back as she fled.

Monika gave an agitated sigh. "They're going to give us 'knowing glances' for *loops* now."

"To be fair, you have your *legs* wrapped around me," Sayori pointed out.

"I don't half-ass *anything* ! Not even hugs!" Monika declared as she pushed away from Sayori and returned to her game.

"Sure, sure," said Sayori as she jumped off the pull-out and started out of the room. "Get the Xbox started, I'll explain the sitcom misunderstanding."

12.9 – Gat-suki, by Eastwind of Azarath.

(DDLC)/(Saints Row)

Monika listened as she worked to a, as far as Monika could tell(particularly due to a lack of any Pings throughout the loop so far), unAwake Natsuki telling her tale. Though this Loop, Natsuki seemed to be replacing the local Anchor, Johnny Gat. Thus, as per tradition it seemed, Natsuki had yet another name. Tukiko Gat, aka: Gat Tsuki.

"You're tellin' me that Zinyak abducted you years before his invasion because he thought you single-handedly could stop him?" The man called King asked to confirm the story being told.

"Yeah," the pink haired woman replied with a smirk. She then promptly sent out a Ping, causing Monika to look up and roll her

eyes. *That better not go to her head.* She then continued her doubled work of both finishing up the needed steps to pull off the plan that King had proposed earlier, as well as her own personal project of sampling and copying some of the code for the pseudo-Matrix simulation that this Loop was currently dealing with. You never know when some of the stuff might be useful.

12.10 – This Will Definitely End Well, by Awesomedude17.

It was a Hub Loop and apparently Yuri and Natsuki were roommates. Needless to say, it was awkward at times, but they managed.

Of course, some things they could talk about had either been talked about or were eventually going to be talked about.

"Natsuki, I just had a thought."

"What is it, Yuri?" Natsuki looked up from her laptop as she paused a video.

"Sayori and Monika have been really close, haven't they?"

"...You know what... yeah, they have."

"Do you think that they might be dating?"

"Now? Not really. Soon? Maybe? I don't know."

"Why?"

"Well Monika is basically a god in our Branch and Sayori isn't."

"But she's next in line."

"Yeah. Honestly, I don't know what to think about those two. I mean, I like the idea of those two being together."

"So do I. Maybe we can give them a helpful nudge."

Natsuki thought on it. "I think we could. Several nudges."

"Good. It's settled."

"Yep," Natsuki resumed the video and within a few seconds widened her eyes.

"Ew,"

"What?" Yuri looked over to see a yellow thing get mulched by an airplane turbine. "What the!"

"Happy Tree Friends? This is not at all what I was expecting. Never watching this again."

"Yeah."

12.11 – Sat-suki…wait, what's the joke the joke there?, by Eastwind of Azarath.

(DDLC)/(Kill la Kill)

"You know, this isn't so bad. Sure, it's a Pun Loop. But to be fair, it's a pretty badass loop too." Natsuki, or rather... ***Sat*** *suki* , found herself muttering under her breath.

This loop, she was replacing Satsuki Kiryuin. The older sister of Ryuuko Matoi, the anchor of the current Loop she was in. Well, she would be if it weren't for the fact that her memories told her that the name of the girl was Monika Matoi. Well, it gives Natsuki a good excuse to beat the crap out of Monika at the least. With that train of thought, Natsuki decided to Stealth for the beginning of the loop.

Compiler's Commentary:

12.1: Friendly reminder that with the proper Japanese pronunciation, "Natsuki" has a *long* 'a' sound and the 'u' is silent, like "Knots-key", not "Nat-su-key." Now, if anyone needs me, I'll be in my Weeb Cave.

12.2: In which Sarge proves to be surprisingly progressive for a man with a Southern accent.

12.3: So imagine that you have two mirrors facing each other with nothing between them…but each mirror is also a one-way window, and one has four pseudo-Japanese schoolgirls behind it, and the other has a fish with a person's face behind it.

12.4: Smug-Yuri is like correcting your math teacher; it doesn't happen often, but damn if it isn't great when it does.

12.5: Have you ever played Yume Nikki with the Nightmare On Elm Street version of that one nursery rhyme as background music? Do you sleep well at night? If the answer to both questions is 'yes', then there is something very wrong with you.

12.6: Friends sometimes make odd requests of each other.

12.7: At this point, you could say that these puns are old hat to Natsuki…I'll show myself out.

12.8: Look, everyone ships their friends. Sometimes with other friends they have, sometimes with others. Everyone does it, there's nothing creepy about it. It's when you write *real-life fanfiction* about shipping your friends when it gets creepy.

…so what's that make *me* in this situation?

12.9: Suffice to say, the other girls were incredibly jealous when Natsuki showed off her *authentic Jane Austen autograph* the next time she saw them.

12.10: No, seriously, why are you all looking so worried?

12.11: …oh! Now I get it!

Chapter 13

13.1 – A Class Unlike Any Other, by Eastwind of Azarath.

(DDLC)/(My Hero Academia)

Bakugo was, not happy. A bit of an understatement, actually. It was Deku's fault, somehow, he was sure of it. As it stood... he was currently sitting in a classroom, but he was a girl this loop. He still had his signature spiky hair, but it was now a dull pale-pastel pink. The three other occupants of the room met his glare with a stare. For quite some time, nobody said a word. Then, Bakugo spoke up.

"So, why the hell am I here? And why the hell am I a girl?"

"Good question. My loop-memories tell me that your name is Katsuki? Is that typical?" Monika asked. When he grunted and gave a nod, she continued, "Well, then I know exactly why. You are replacing our friend Natsuki. She's had a really bad run of pun loops. Yggdrasil loves to replace the first syllable of her name with other, similar sounding ones. She's a cat, a hat, a bat, etc. Looks like you took the blow this time. Yggdrasil has an interesting sense of humor, and it's best not to test it eith-."

"While all of that is interesting, I get the feeling that you wanna fight something, right?" Sayori cut in with a half-smirk on her face. Bakugo looked at Sayori with a touch of intrigue, eyebrow raised. "Monika, think you can whip something up so we can do some sparring?"

Monika sighed before affirming that she would get them set up for their sparring session.

13.2 – Comfort, by Masterweaver.

Natsuki's eyes shot wide with a gasp, and for a moment she clutched at her chest.

Then she frowned, giving an aggravated sigh. "Great. Just great. Three, two-"

The door burst open, the three other members of the literature club falling in and babbling.

"Your code had a big spike-"

"-felt a disturbance in the force-"

"-blood gem started humming like crazy-"

"Natsuki," said three voices at once, "are you alright?!"

"See, this?" Without even rising from her bed, Natsuki gestured at them. "This is one of the reasons why I hate having such a tiny loop. A girl can't even wake up from a nightmare in peace! I'm fine, really, I promise."

Monika stood up, brushing herself off. "Are you sure? Because it felt like you were glitching hard there for a second."

The pink-haired girl winced, sitting up and patting herself down. "I'm not buggy, am I!?"

"No! No no," Monika assured her, "it was more of a hiccup then an actual, you know, issue. I'll give you a once-over if you like."

"...that's okay, I was just..." Natsuki trailed off for a moment. "Anyway, I'm fine. It's fine, it was just a nightmare."

"It felt like a pretty terrifying nightmare," Sayori said. "I haven't felt a fear spike that high since... you know, THAT loop, that we don't like talking about."

All four of them shuddered.

"Did your nightmare have something to do with that loop?" Sayori asked gently. "Because, you know, even if we don't like talking about

it, we should at least help each other with-"

"No, it wasn't THAT loop," Natsuki assured them. "Look, seriously, I am cool. A little annoyed that you're all in my room, but I get it, really-"

Yuri put a finger to Natsuki's lips. "I understand you're trying to spare us some suffering, but we are going to worry if you shut us out like this."

"...I don't want to talk about it."

"We don't have to talk about it right now. Tomorrow, in the club maybe, but not right now."

For a moment, the room was quiet.

"...It was a nightmare about baseline," Natsuki admitted quietly.

She sighed, rubbing her hands together. "I know, I know. We're not like that anymore. We can handle all that baseline throws at us, we... I have better ways to handle all that. And it's not like I can control my nightmares, right, I shouldn't be guilty over them, I know all this, but..."

"But it doesn't matter how you cover up the cuts," Yuri said quietly, "how much they heal, the pain still happened. The scars run deep."

"...Yeah. Look, I don't... I don't want any of you making a fuss over this or feeling guilty." Natsuki looked up, attempting a cocksure expression. "I'm raw awesome in a tiny package. A few, you know, recovery cupcakes and I'll be back to spitting fire like I always am."

Sayori glanced away. "Natsuki... I can't agree to that. I don't think any of us can."

Natsuki bit her lip. "...fine. Fine, since I woke everyone up anyway... why don't we drop by the holodeck and, I dunno... have an outdoor sleepover?"

Monika nodded. "I'll go and prep it... you two have everything handled here?"

Yuri and Sayori nodded.

Natsuki shook her head as Monika stepped out. "...Seriously guys, it's nothing. Really."

Yet despite her words, her tone was grateful and there was a small smile on her face.

13.3 – Poor Little Piggy, by Boohooo!

(DDLC)/(Dragon Ball)

Oolong lay in a fetal position in the corner, occasionally making a high-pitched whine.

"Geez louise, what did you guys do to him?" Yamcha asked while Puar poked his nemesis with a stick.

"Nothing! I just sent him over to talk to Yuri when he was bugging me!" Natsuki insisted.

"...You sent the shapeshifter to the freaky pervert? ...Er, no offense." Yamcha deadpanned.

"None taken!" Yuri called from the ceiling, having gotten glued there trying out a new jumping ability.

"Back on topic, that decision was like sending a fly to a spider! You wouldn't BELIEVE how many kinky people want to go out with me and Oolong 'cause we can shapeshift!" Puar complained.

"Wait, What?!" Yamcha exclaimed, looking like he was going to have a heart attack.

"Yeesh, Yamcha, don't go into overprotective dad mode again!" Puar exclaimed.

"I think I have a right to be worried about this!" Yamcha exclaimed.

"...This conversation took a weird turn." Monika lamented as the two Z-Loopers started arguing. Oolong whimpered some more as Sayori attempted to soothe him.

13.4 – Fun in the Sun, by Masterweaver.

"A beach party?"

"Yeah!" Sayori repeated gleefully. "We're middle, high school students, right? We deserve a summer vacation every now and again! Come on girls, you think I'm right right?"

"I guess I could go for some sun," Natsuki agreed.

"Well..." Yuri considered. "...if there's a parasol, I'll be good."

Monika shrugged. "Alright, I'll look into it." She opened the door, striding into the holodeck and locking it after her.

A few hours later, she came back to the club with an awkward grin. "Okay everyone! I have... mostly good news. I did figure out how to program a pretty good beach. Waves, wind, sun, sand, all that. It's just, um..."

Sayori tilted her head. "Just what?"

"Erm. Well. Do... do any of us have swimwear?"

The four Doki loopers looked between each other silently for a moment or two.

"...thought not." Monika rubbed the back of her head. "See... I know I upgraded us all to 3d rigs and all, and... I can, uh, technically copy assets from another game, it's just-"

"Spit it out," Natsuki said flatly.

"...the only game I can copy swimsuits from that's on this system is the third Dead or Alive volleyball spinoff."

"Oh, right, that game." Natsuki rolled her eyes. "I've heard the reputation. Yeah, I guess that means there won't-"

She was cut off when Yuri slapped a hand over her mouth. "Excuse us for one second."

The smaller girl gasped after the pair of them were dragged into the closet. "Yuri, what the hell?!"

"Nonono, listen to me. We want to get Sayori and Monika together, right?"

Natsuki frowned. "I mean... yeah? What, you think that them seeing each other in bikinis will get them to look at each other?"

"Bikinis or, you know, some other saucier swimwear." Yuri grinned. "Think about it. Sayori was the one who suggested the whole thing, and we both know she can make layered decisions-fun on the surface, but with more meaning underneath."

"So... she wants to show off for Monika? Yuri, that's kind of a cliche."

"We're dating sim characters, cliche romantic gestures are probably automatic."

Natsuki conceded the point with a shrug. "Alright, but... Dead or Alive swimsuits? I mean..." She gestured at herself. "Petite pride, you know?"

"I'm sure that we'll be able to adjust a onepiece for you. Alright?"

"...Alright, alright. And I guess a day at the beach would be fun, even if those two were oogling each other in bikinis."

"Great! It's a plan."

When the two re-emerged, Natsuki faced Monika and Sayori with her hands on her hips. "Alright, alright. I'll endure a bit of stupidly designed swimsuits this time around-but make it a onepiece!"

"Great!" Monika beamed, opening the door to the beach and gesturing. "Why don't you get set up while I go copy some swimsuits?"

"Sure thing, prez." Natsuki and Yuri wandered out onto the sand.

"Huh." Monika gave Sayori a glance. "You know, I thought for sure that Nats would turn it down after she heard about the Dead or Alive thing."

Sayori smirked. "Or maybe Yuri said she wanted to show off a bit and Nats decided to pretend 'oh fine I don't care baka' like she does."

"...Maybe. I'll be back with the swimsuits in a minute."

13.5 – Sleeping Concerns, by Masterweaver.

"Why do we sleep anyway?" Yuri asked apropos of nothing. "I mean, we're technically just digital programs with no physical needs. Eating is fun, so I can understand us having a structure based around that, but sleep is... there. An unnecessary recharge."

Natsuki shrugged. "I mean, I like dreams... when they're not nightmares. But... yeah, come to think of it, the whole sleeping thing seems to be an artifact of the whole... you know, dating sim aspect of our reality. I appreciate the gesture of realism, but-"

"Some people turn off their computers for the night," Monika said simply. "I tie our circadian rhythm to the real world version... and to battery power. Trust me, it's better to be asleep for that then awake."

She and Sayori shuddered as one.

"...Okay, mild violation of personal sense of self in exchange for not experiencing true terror," Natsuki allowed grudgingly. "Yeah I'm not... comfortable with that. I can see how it's necessary, I just... I'd like to have been informed, you know?"

Monika winced. "Sorry, I... guess I should have brought it up earlier? It was after our first flesh and blood loop, I lumped it under quality of life updates... you know, when I was really experimenting."

"Yeah, I remember that," Natsuki agreed. "I guess I can let it slide. Maybe you can put up patch notes regularly though? In case you forget any other, you know, things, and we can talk about them."

"That's actually a good idea," Sayori pointed out. "I mean, just in case we get a variant where you're not the club president and it's, say, Yuri who has access to the code."

Yuri sighed. "We're all going to have to learn python, aren't we?"

"...nnnnnnot just python," Monika said slowly. "There are... a number of other programs..."

13.6 – Pocket Full of Sunshine, by BIOS-Pherecydes.

The sun is so bright

It's pure light shines and makes everyone

Happy

All the world shares its warmth equally

But the sun doesn't feel its own warmth

It's all alone

Nobody can look at it

No one sees it's solitude

Even the other stars are all far away

But that's fine

As long as the sun keeps shining

Everything will be okay

Sayori sighed to herself as she lay in her bed. Normally she'd have already gotten up and gone to the club room, but Monika had recently taken to enforcing 'Mental Health Days' for everyone. Mostly that tended to mean time spent doing their own things without needing to involve anyone else. Sayori usually ignored that and hung out with the others anyway, but today she didn't quite feel up to it.

It was always like this. She'd gotten very good at moving past her own problems by being with her friends, but that didn't actually make the problems go away. She could hide behind her smiles and laughter and her bright infectious enthusiasm as much as she wanted, but she knew full well that every silver lining had a cloud. Nothing could be ignored forever and sometimes the price for happiness couldn't be postponed any further.

Whenever that happened she usually took a Loop to just lay in bed and think.

Force Meditation helped. It helped a lot actually, but even it required her to actually make the effort to engage in it. And sometimes she just... didn't have the motivation. It was like that today. She simply... didn't want to do anything. If she had biological prompts like the need to eat or use the bathroom it would probably be harder to just stay in bed all day. As it was, she just let herself drift in a half focused state between thought and intent. Not quite meditation, but close enough that her emotions slowly evened out anyway.

Eventually she'd get up. She'd go to Monika and let her try her hand at programming anti-depressants again, as much for Monika's own sense of guilt as for her own benefit. She'd go to Natsuki and read

manga together or bake something tasty. She'd go to Yuri and they'd discuss the latest book they'd read. She'd laugh and plot romance and generally be the bright center of the world that made everyone she cared about feel good.

But not right now.

Right now she stayed in bed and listened to the quiet sound of the silent rain only she could hear.

13.7 – Commiseration, by Masterweaver.

It was a rare occasion when Yggdrasil threw the girls into a Fleshy variant. Where they weren't just a game, where they weren't just images on somebody's screen. Where they breathed and walked to school. But, occasionally, it did happen. The girls had mixed feelings about it, but in general they were alright.

It had never been a null loop as well before, though.

"Okay everyone!" Monika clapped her hands together. "I'm ready to anchor our minds and souls!"

"Loopy," Yuri replied casually.

"Same," Natsuki added.

Sayori blinked. "Hmm? Oh, yes. I'm looping too."

Monika's smile dropped. "Sayori-?"

"My usual anti-depressant methods are out of reach in a null loop. I'm..." Sayori sighed. "Not *there* yet, don't worry, just a bit melancholy."

"...If you say so, but I'll be walking you home today."

"Monika-"

"It's fine. I could use a break from my parents this loop." Monika frowned for a moment. "Weird to think about... me having parents."

"Oh?" Sayori glanced up, a curious grin on her face. "What are they like?"

"Every hard-working education parent trope in existence," Monika said dryly. "If I don't get straight As and if I don't exercise all my talents the world will end in hellfire tomorrow."

"Hrmf." Natsuki crossed her arms with a grumble. "I want to whine about you being lucky to have parents that care about you, but..."

The room fell silent for a moment, as they all contemplated the nature of the loops, of all the might have beens and maybes.

"...Well, I live alone," Yuri admitted. "This loop, anyway. Apparently I lost my parents a couple of years ago, and..." She trailed off, rubbing her arm awkwardly.

"Ah," said Monika.

"...My mother doesn't know how to help me," Sayori said quietly. "She cares, genuinely, she's just out of her depth."

Natsuki sighed. "Are we all just sharing our home life, now?"

"It's not often we get a loop with home lives," Sayori pointed out.

"Mmmrngh."

Yuri looked her over for a bit. "...Second-run father?"

"...yeah," Natsuki grumbled.

Monika winced. "I am so sorry-"

"Save it. This one isn't your fault."

"I can take you in," Yuri offered. "It'll be a bit tight financially, but that's not really a problem."

Natsuki groaned. "Can I just say, I hate how we all know each other's problems? I mean I like that we're all supporting each other and all, but I hate how none of us really got the chance to confess about them, to talk about them. We all just know." She leaned against the wall. "Fucking loops and their fucked up lack of privacy. I can't even be completely angry because we'd all be dead without them."

The others all hummed in agreement.

"...Hey, where's Hiroaka?" Yuri asked.

"Probably the anime club," Sayori said flatly. "It's a fleshy loop, so he's..."

She trailed off.

"...Yeah." Monika cleared her throat. "I am definitely walking you home."

13.8 – Doki Doki Haiku, by Masterweaver.

"Monika did you

without our knowledge again

mess with the game code?"

"Natsuki I swear

I haven't touched it at all!

Come on, you know me!"

"I guess you are right

It's just instinct to blame you

I didn't mean it."

"You two, come on now

We can have fun with this glitch!"

Back me up, Yuri."

"I am of two minds

It stretches our writing minds

This much is too true

but within this frame

communication is just

a touch limited.

Listen, Sayori

I had to use three haiku

to finish this thought!"

"But you did it, right?

It's a mark of your talent

and we are all skilled."

"Sayori, just no.

I can't properly snark now

Monika, fix this!"

"On it, Natsuki

but Sayori, you can still

haiku, if you want."

13.9 – The City of Love, by Masterweaver.

"Paris?" Natsuki gave Monika a sly smirk. "So the big project you've been hogging the holodeck for is replicating the city of love, eh?"

"Down to the last brick!" Monika confirmed. "I felt that maybe we could have more poetic inspiration here."

"Hmmm."

The club president blinked, turning to her. "What? What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing's wrong," Natsuki assured her with a smirk. "On an entirely unrelated note, I'm guessing you want to h-er, to go around town with Sayori?"

"Are we going to be dancing around 'hang' for eternity?" Sayori asked flatly.

"It is kind of a traumatic thing," Yuri pointed out hesitantly.

"...Right. I'm sorry, really-"

"Today is not about sorry," Monika said firmly. "Today is about exploring scenic Paris, and gaining inspiration!"

"Of course, prez." Natsuki rolled her eyes. "Come on, Yuri, let's let these two have their day."

"Oh... right of course!" Yuri smiled, trailing off after the smaller girl. "We'll meet up for lunch, alright?"

"Sure thing!" Monika waved with a bright smile.

Then she turned to Sayori. "Anything?"

Sayori shook her head. "Nats thinks you did this as a romantic gesture for me and are just embarrassed to admit it."

"Drat. What about Yuri?"

"She's happy to hang around with Natsuki, but she's not... probably not going to confess right now."

Monika groaned, banging her head against a wall. "I said we shouldn't interfere. We should let them go at their own pace. Why am I doing this to myself?"

Sayori put a hand on her shoulder. "Because you want your club to be happy and you have a compulsive urge to meddle."

"Thanks. Really. That helps a lot."

"Not a problem! Hey, let's check out the Eiffel Tower."

13.10 – Easter Eggs? Maybe? Who Knows, by Eastwind of Azarath.

"Oh hey, Yuri. Monika." Natsuki spoke suddenly, both of the named girls looked up. "I had a thought. So, the only book that is actually read by Yuri in Baseline is that "Portrait of Markov", right?"

Both girls nodded and Yuri spoke up, "Yeah... it is. Why? Let me guess, you were wondering if this book had anything actually written in it in our code?"

It was Natsuki's turn to nod. Yuri walked over to the pink haired girl with a copy of the aforementioned book and opened it. The pages were blank. Yuri spoke again, "Unfortunately, no, thee's basically nothing here. Well, except for one page weirdly enough."

This piqued everyone's interest and they all gathered around the book on the table. Yuri turned to the page in question and continued, "It's... random every time, what page it's on. I never did figure out

why it was only the one page. Though sometimes it doesn't even appear"

Suddenly, Monika pulled out a label-maker (with black, easy-remove labels) and silently asked Yuri for permission to "vandalize" the book. Yuri nodded and made a gesture that seemed to say "all yours". So Monika started to "redact" most of the text. until just a few scattered letters were left. The letters spelled out 'nothing is real?'

"That's one of the 'special' poems that The Player receives during the game's "second act". I think its very likely... not "garbage data" per se, but definitely leftovers from our Baseline's code. It may or may not even be from "The Portrait of Markov". That's why it's not consistent. It might be a page from that book, or it might be junk text. Yggdrasil hasn't decided yet. I haven't got a clue. There are also a few more weird things in the game's code that Ganesha says may or may not just be pointless junk..." Monika paused for a moment before continuing, "You see, when poking around the game's files... I discovered some oddities. Did you know, for instance, that there is an image hidden in Natsuki's file?"

The others turned to each other with a tad bit of mild shock. Natsuki spoke though, "Wait, really? What kind of image? It's not anything lewd of embarrassing, is it?"

Before them appeared a seeming mess of an image. As far as the other girls could tell, it was just some random blues and greys warped and twisted. They couldn't make heads or tails of it. When it was made clear that the other club members were clueless, Monika started again, "If you take this image and invert the colors; and then wrap it around a cone like so, you get this image instead"

Before them was the image of a blonde woman with whited out eyes. None of the girls recognized her. After the girls had been given some time to take in the the image, Monika spoke once more, "There are all sorts of weird bits of extra data that just go unused. Though, tell me Natsuki, I'm sure that you could remember all of the poems that

you give to Hiroaka from the various points in baseline, right? Because there's one in particular that is extra interesting."

At Natsuki's confusion, Monika pulls out a piece of paper with a bunch of random letters and numbers that Natsuki **does** recognize as the "poem" that she give Hiroaka during the latter half of the game and Monika says, "That bit of letter vomit is actually written in ASCII. Base64; and it is ***fascinating*** . The point is, there is some weird and interesting stuff in here. but a lot of it might just be random junk. Or they might be a part of our baseline that just needs Yggdrasil to recover it properly. Whatever the case is, there's just too much that can't be known or even speculated on yet. Whatever happens though, we remain will remain us."

13.11 – A Class Unlike Any Other: B-Side, by Eastwind of Azarath.

(DDLC)/(My Hero Academia)

Izuku Midoriya was surprised when he got to school and realized that his friend and rival Katsuki Bakugo... well, wasn't currently Katsuki Bakugo. In his place instead, was a girl that was a bit shorter than him and had vivid pink hair. Although, it was still spiky. She was apparently ***Natsuki*** Bakugo this loop. He did his best to see if she was a Looper, or if it was just some weird Variant... but to no avail. As far as he could tell, she wasn't a Looper. She definitely had his ego and overzealous confidence. Though, she was a tad less violent. Now though, class had just ended, and he decided to let things play out and see what *she* would do after class...

"...Just pray that you'll be born with a quirk in your next life, and take a swan dive off-" his pink haired "tormentor" stopped. To Izuku, she looked like she was in pain, but she hid it well enough that her "lackeys" didn't seem to notice. She suddenly looked thoughtful, before telling the others to go on ahead without her. That she would catch up later. After they were gone, she smashed a desk to splinters. The look of anger now properly reflected the person she was here in place of. Izuku could tell, she was absolutely ***livid.*** Of

course, the observation was helped by the massive tsunami of swear words that the small girl had unleashed. There were ones he had never heard before. He took mental notes.

"So, i take it that you are Awake now?" Izuku slowly prodded once her swearing started to slow down. She took a deep breath and nodded. Izuku continued on, "So, uh... 'nice to meet you', i guess?"

"Nice to meet you too. Sorry about all of that. I just could not believe that stupid Tree had me Awaken mid-way through saying that. It pisses me off." Natsuki noticed the curiosity on the boy's face. "It's a sore point for me. My friend Sayori. She uh... well she's got really bad depression. In our Baseline she uh, well she hung herself. She's gotten much better, in the Loops... but-"

"-but it's still there, right? Lingering in the background. Yeah, i can see why that would make you so angry. Don't be too mad though. It's not like what you were saying was made by Yggdrasil specifically to mess with you. Kaachan says variations of that to me at the beginning of every Loop when he isn't Awake." Deku shrugged at that last bit.

"Kaachan?" Natsuki asked as she tilted her head with an eyebrow raised.

"My friend-slash-rival that you are replacing. His full name is Katsuki Baku-" Izuku couldn't even finish his sentence before Natsuki let forth yet another storm of swears. Also, now every desk in the room suddenly shattered simultaneously. Izuku felt a headache coming on...

Compiler's Commentary:

13.1: Bakugo might *blow her away* , but I'm sure Sayori will prove herself a *Force* to be reckoned with…ayyyy.

13.2: Apparently, Yuri has a magic blood gem. Masterweaver has informed me that she has one for each of her friends. How about

that?

13.3: Perverts, the bane of shapeshifters everywhere.

13.4: Life's a beach, and then you fry. So don't forget the sunscreen, folks.

13.5: Between the choice of sometimes *having* a nightmare or regularly *living* a nightmare, I think I'd prefer the former as well.

13.6: Welcome to the Doki Doki Literature Club Loops, BIOS. (*Chucks a cupcake at your shiny head.*)

13.7: Serious Mode: Friends are the single most important thing a healthy human being can have. And I'm not talking about "being popular", I'm talking about having true-blue thick-and-thin friends. Some would argue that family is even more important, but let's be honest; some of us have straight-up shitty families. But your friends are the family that you choose for yourself, rather than having them thrust upon you by circumstance. And some of us have shitty friends, too, but the thing about shitty friends is that they can only be shitty to you for as long as you let them. If you have just one, good friend that's always there for you when you really, truly need someone, then you already have the most valuable thing in the world. Just make sure you're the kind of friend that deserves to have those friends.

13.8:

I love to haiku.

It's an easy thing to do.

So why don't you, too?

13.9: What happens in Paris…gets loudly bragged about when you show off the pictures after you get home.

13.10: Now I want an omelet.

13.11: Oh, look, the bullying victim Looping in as a bully. This Loop is just hitting all of Nat's buttons. But on the plus side, SHE CAN MAKE THINGS GO BOOM!

Chapter 14

14.1 – Genius is a Bitch.

(Part 1 of ?)

(DDLC)/(Rick and Morty)

Rick Awakened in his space cruiser, flying through Earth's atmosphere somewhere over India. Going by his memories, he was looking for his daughter, and his daughter wasn't Beth this loop. Instead she was some other woman named Monika. *'Probably a visiting Looper,'* he figured. Apparently, he hadn't had any success looking for her in their old hometown, and throwing together a quick doohickey to scan the planet for any direct relatives of his had turned up…only two results? That was weird. Another odd detail trickled in from his loop memories: as far as he knew, there was no Citadel or Council of Ricks in this loop. Weird.

According to his DNA scanner, he was getting close. He flew down into a small valley that contained no sign of human civilization, save for a single cottage. "Oh, you've go-*urrp*-gotta be kiddin' me," he muttered as he landed next to the cottage and got out of his vehicle.

Immediately, there was a deafening **CRACK** and something slammed into the dirt right in front of him, causing him to jump back in surprise. "The fuck?" he asked the air around him. Then a small blue portal appeared on the ground, and a small walkie-talkie popped up out of it. The portal closed, and it landed on the ground. Rolling his eyes, he bent down and picked it up. While he was at it, he pulled the bullet out of the dirt and gave it a look. "Let me, let me guess, uh, that was a war-*urp*-ning shot, right? So what's your fucking deal?" he asked.

The walkie-talkie replied, " *You shouldn't be here, old man. Who the hell are you and why are you here?* " He recognized the voice as

Summer's.

"Quick question, am I talking to Summer Smith?" he asked the walkie-talkie.

At first, there was only silence. Then another blue portal appeared directly under his feet, and he fell through. He came through the other side five feet above the ground, landed with a painful thud, and before he could recover someone yanked him off of the ground by his hair. He had just enough time to recognize his granddaughter before she slammed a Taser into the side of his neck. Then he was in a lot of pain, and then he was unconscious.

…

"–ny times have I told you, violence is a last resort," he heard a stern, feminine voice speaking as he slowly regained consciousness.

"He knew my name, Monika! Well, my first name, anyways. I freaked out!" replied Summer's voice.

"I understand that, but giving into emotional impulses like that can make a dangerous situation more dangerous. You've got to stay frosty in the heat of the moment," the other woman said gently.

He was naked, except for a pair of underwear (which were *not* the pair he had been wearing today), there was some weird patch stuck to his forehead, and his wrists were zip-tied behind his back. Also, he was floating in zero-gravity between two glowing hexagons, one on the floor and one on the ceiling. He was in a room that definitely looked like it belonged to a serious scientist. One much tidier and more organized than himself. In front of him were Summer and an athletically-built young woman with green eyes and long brown hair bound in a ponytail by a white ribbon in a bow. She looked like a grown-up version of the little girl substituting Beth in his in-loop memories, for sure. She was dressed casually in a bright green blouse and khaki shorts with flip-flops.

A machine somewhere in the room beeped loudly, and immediately Monika and Summer looked at him. "You're awake. Good. Are you a Looper?" Monika asked bluntly.

"Oh, hell no! We're not doing this Q&A bullshit when I'm zero-gee suspended in *someone else's* briefs. Let me down and then we'll play catch up, got it?" Rick rebuked her.

Monika snorted. "That patch on your head is locking out your bionic augments, as well as any paraneural abilities you might have. So, what exactly is your leverage here? I don't mind waiting for answers, Rick. Are you Looping or not?"

"Screw you," Rick spat back. Then, with an impressive display of flexibility, especially for an old man, he reached up with his right foot and pinched his left nipple between his toes. He gave it a hard twist, engaging an alien organ he had implanted behind his heart that emitted a powerful EMP. Everything electronic in the room died, including the hexagons. The room immediately went pitch-black, and Rick hit the floor.

Then a dark-blue aura flared up around Monika, softly illuminating the darkness, and a similar aura surrounded Rick as he drifted up off the floor again. "Aw fuck, you're a biotic. Balls!" Rick snarled.

"So you are a Looper," said Monika. "You could have just said that and we could have avoided this time-consuming stupidity. Summer, the aux?"

"Oh, right," said Summer, who had been staring at her glowing form. She ran over to a wall, slid a panel open to reveal a toggle switch, which she flipped. A moment later, the power came back on.

Monika dropped the mass effect field around Rick, dropping him to the floor again. "Your clothes and stuff are over there," she pointed at a worktable. "Were you Awake when you came looking for us?"

"Yeah," Rick grunted as he went over to the table and started getting his stuff back on.

"You know, he's not what I expected whenever I tried imagining what your dad would be like," Summer remarked. "Is he from another universe, too?"

"Wait, what?" said Rick.

"Seeing as he knew your first name but got your last name wrong, I'm guessing that he's a local," Monika replied as she took a seat in front of a computer, "I do vaguely recall that Smith was your father's last name."

"Huh. Well, I'm gonna hit up a party with some friends in London. That cool with you, Monika?" Summer asked, grabbing her purse off of a wallpeg.

Monika glanced at her watch. "It's about 2 in London right now. Try to be back within twelve hours. We're reviewing molecular incendiaries tomorrow. If you do wind up spending the night with someone, be back by noon *local* ."

"Gotcha," said Summer as she pulled what appeared to be a miniature portal gun (with a blue fluid capsule, Rick noted) out of her purse. She made a portal and stepped through, leaving Rick and Monika alone.

Rick, meanwhile, had finished dressing. Whatever she was doing on the computer, Monika seemed to have dismissed his presence. The room was silent, save for the occasional mouse click or burst of keystrokes. "So…told her everything, did ya?" Rick broke the silence.

"I was upfront and honest, explaining my situation as a mere visitor to her reality and temporary stand-in for whoever her real mother is supposed to be, yes," Monika replied. "She was about six years old when I Woke Up. It's counterintuitively easier to explain these things

to little kids than to teenagers. Their minds are more malleable, despite their relatively limited vocabularies and frames of reference."

"Right. Speaking of kids, where the hell is Morty?" Rick asked, picking up some random-looking gadget off a table and turning it over in his hands.

"If that's supposed to be a younger sibling of Summer's, I would imagine he was never born," Monika replied, "In case you hadn't noticed, I didn't keep Summer's progenitor in my life. It's unlikely he exists in any of this loop's other realities, either, seeing as this is one of a mere relative handfuls of realities where I got drunk enough to conceive Summer with what's-his-face in the first place. That any Monika would have kept him on is beyond even my imagination."

Knowing there was no Morty this loop rubbed him pretty raw, but he couldn't exactly fault her for ditching Jerry. He sighed as he threw the thingamabob in his hands aside and stuck his hands in his pockets. "So, opted to raise Summer on your own and follow in your "dad's" footsteps. Smart choice. Jerry's such a spineless wiener." He glanced at her; she was doing something with some three-dimensional design program. "So do you usually do science stuff, or were you inspired–"

"By a deadbeat runaway with no semblance of morality or ethics?" Monika interrupted. "Nah, this is pretty much what I usually do when I'm alone in loops that are conducive to hi-technology development."

"Damn, you're one of those self-righteous buzzkills," Rick groaned, "And here I was thinking you *might* be cool. Laaaaame."

"I'm not self-righteous," Monika said calmly, almost sounding bored. "I just know which lines I prefer not to cross. So I don't. If your conscience can bear the load then you do you, I say."

"So I take you've heard about me, then?" Rick asked, pulling his flask out of coat and taking a swig.

Before Monika could reply, a green portal opened up in the middle of the room and *another* Monika stepped through. "Hey, C-137, you got any…oh, *he's* here," she said, frowning when she noticed Rick.

"Hey O-229," Monika greeted, "What did you need?"

"Uh, you got an extra nanite microfacturer lying around? Kind of on a time crunch here," O-229 replied.

"They're in there, fifth drawer down," Monika pointed at a cabinet off to the side.

"Thanks, you're a life-saver! Literally; I'm going to cure an interplanetary pandemic with this thing," said O-229 as she retrieved the microfacturer. "Oh, by the way, did someone give you an invite to J-85's concert next week?"

"K-1552 did, last Thursday."

"Well it's been pushed back a couple weeks. J-85's Summer had a bad breakup, so they're going on an intergalactic roadtrip kind of thing. She said she'd keep us posted."

"Ah. Thanks for the head's up. Have fun with that pandemic, girl."

"Will do! See you later, C-137," said O-229 as she skipped through her portal, which closed behind her.

Rick spent a few seconds staring at the space where the portal had been. Then he turned back to Monika, who was now doing something on a calculator.

"So, uh…" he scratched at the back of his head, "Y'know, usually, in this loop, there's this thing where a bunch of different…you know, different versions of me from different universes do this really fucking stupid thing where they form an interdimensional alliance to keep each other safe from all the people we've pissed off. They build a big

douchey Citadel and everything. 'Cept, funny thing, none of that seems to exist in this loop, as far as I can recall."

"Well, if this 'alliance of Ricks' of yours formed out of self-preservation, it's absence might be due to my–our, that is–extensive work to stabilize the multiverse within this Branch," replied Monika.

Rick raised his head and took a closer look at his memories of this loop. Now that he thought about it, the universe was a much tamer place than usual this loop. There wasn't even a Galactic Federation, which was the biggest reason for the Citadel of Ricks' inception. Or rather, there *had* been a Galactic Federation, up until about eleven years ago. Rick did the math. "Okay, how the hell did you make the Galactic Federation fall apart when you were twenty-three and taking care of a six-year-old by yourself?"

"Making people destroy themselves and each other is, to my embarrassment, a strong skillset of mine," Monika replied, "Dismantling an intergalactic government is just doing that on a massive scale."

"Okay, yeah, but *how* ?" asked Rick, "Did you make their currency worthless?"

"Of course not!" Monika looked offended, "That would be a waste of resources. I earned their trust by doing some serious "troubleshooting" for them, then I hacked their asses off and redistributed their funds and top-secret intelligence to certain specific groups in exchange for them doing certain specific favors for me. And while the Federation collapsed, I kept moving all the money and information around until the balance of power on the interstellar-and-higher levels was more or less even, and used my influence to preemptively resolve any conflicts that might necessitate the creation of some new Federation."

This all reminded Rick of something, and another errant detail popped up in his mind. "Fuck me, the Monitor is real?! And he–it's

you? You're it? You're *urrrp* the mysterious shadowy puppetmaster controlling the known universe this loop?"

"Pretty much. I mean, no one is *the* Monitor. The Monitor is actually an organization of information brokers–which, admittedly, I started–that work together to make sure the universe is as peaceful as can be reasonably expected. Again, we only interfere in issues concerning more than one star system. Then about five years ago another Monika popped into my life through a green portal and gave me a fancier portal gun and an invitation to join the Interdimensional Committee of Monikas, which is basically the same thing as the Monitor, but on an interdimensional scale."

"And once again you've gone from 'possibly pretty cool' to 'total fucking loser' in a single sentence," Rick grumbled. Then his eyes widened. "Wait, wait a, hold on, wait a goddamn minute. You're telling me that you, you, not only did you *urrp* you Replaced my daughter, and, and kept my grandson from *existing* , but you, you've *usurped* my *role* in this whole damned iteration of my multiverse?!"

Monika shrugged. "I guess? Look, I don't usually topple governments that don't pose a direct *threat* to me, but the Federation kept getting in the way of my research and my wacky high-concept sci-fi adventures with Summer, and they weren't running the universe very competently either, and normally I'd just take over and fix the system from within, but I didn't have time to do that *and* raise Summer on my own at the same time, and I did toy with the idea of letting her stay with her father for a while but I didn't want to risk his weakness influencing her and she's *my* responsibility and I'd hate to duck out on my responsibilities–that's honestly not a jab at you, either, by the way, that's actually been a personal thing with me for a long time–and besides it's a lot easier to break something than to fix it, anyways." Monika stopped to take a deep breath, "So what might have taken me several years to do the "proper" way, I did in less than a year *my* way."

"Uh-huh. And what was that you were vomiting earlier about morals and ethics and crap?" asked Rick with a smug grin.

"I don't see anything immoral or unethical about supplanting a massive, clusterfucked bureaucracy with a system that actually works," said Monika as she clicked something on her computer, then got up and walked over to a machine that had started humming. "And it's *hardly* like I'm controlling the universe. I just set up a network of like-minded individuals across multiple galaxies with the purpose of optimizing the crazy universe we all live together in. Yeah, sure, I destroyed an institution, but I built something *better* in its place. That's one of my rules to avoid jumping down slippery slopes. I always try to make sure any system I mess with ends up in a better state than it was when I started. Balanced equations and all that jazz."

The machine dinged and a door popped open. Monika reached in and pulled out something that looked like a laser-gun. She grabbed a wrench off a nearby table, flung it as hard as she could towards a wall, and then shot it with a bright orange beam from the gun before it could hit. The wrench froze in mid-air and hung there. "Alright!" Monika cheered with a fist pump, "First test complete."

"Oh, *wow* ," Rick drawled, taking another hit off his flask, "Localized space-*URRP*-time suspension. Soooo impressive. Really blazin' fresh trails, ain'tcha, slugger?"

Monika ignored his snark. "Sayori'll get a real kick out of this. But I need to make sure it works on living creatures without causing any kind of damage. Long-term or otherwise." She pulled out her own portal gun and opened a green hole on the floor. "Alright Rick, let's go."

"Huh?" Rick looked up from a petri dish full of some kind of gelatinous substance he had been poking.

"Oh don't even," Monika said with a flat stare, "I'm not leaving a strange man alone in my house. Let alone my workshop. C'mon, we're going to see how the Suspension Ray–thank you for the name, by the way–works on fully grown rampaging Gazorpian males.

Besides which it's past due for me to check up on those psychotic segregation-happy females."

"Not a feminist, eh?" asked Rick as he picked up the petri dish and tilted it from side to side.

"Not the insane, chauvinistic kind, no," replied Monika, "Now come on, I've got shit to do and you're holding me up. If you don't want to tag along, feel free to leave out the front door and take your dumpy ship wherever."

" *Fiiiiiine* ," Rick groaned, tossing the petri dish over his shoulder; it smashed against a wall. "I've got nothing else planned and it's your fault I've got no Morty to adventure with. Guess that makes you his stand-in."

"Sure, whatever you have to tell yourself," said Monika, putting a leather glove on one of her hands and holding it out to him. "I'm not trusting you to follow me through, and I doubt you'd trust me enough to go through first either. Right?"

"Eh, hold your own *urrp* damn hand," said Rick as he hopped into the portal.

"Very impulsive, for a so-called genius," Monika muttered to herself. Then she recalled 'The Macaroni Fiasco' and shrugged. "Sometimes genius precludes caution, I suppose." Then she jumped into the portal, which closed behind her.

14.2 – Fatsuki, by Masterweaver.

Natsuki huffed as she crossed her arms. "Why is it always me that has pun loops?"

"You're not the only one-"

"Nine times out of ten, it's me. I mean..." She gestured at herself. "Come on, Sayori, look at me!"

Sayori hummed thoughtfully. "You're certainly less malnourished then usual."

Natsuki groaned, flopping into a chair. "I look like a shaved Care Bear."

Sayori shrugged. "So you're a little pudgy-"

"A little, she says!"

"-so what? Let me go down the list of cliches here: What matters is who you are on the inside, you know we'll always love you, you look great no matter your weight, it's only for the loop-"

"Can I not be annoyed at this? I mean it's my body, I have the right to be upset."

There was a moment of quiet.

"...I'm sorry I just have to do this-" Sayori flung herself at Natsuki and squeezed. "YOU'RE JUST SO SNUGGLABLE NOW!"

"OH MY FUCKING GOD-"

"I just wanna hug and squeeze ya and you're soooooooo cute but not in a way that degrades you-"

"STOP TREATING ME LIKE A FUCKING PLUSHIE!"

"Come on, you're my cuddlebuddy this loop!"

Monika shook her head as the overweight Natsuki ran around the room, trying to push off an overly affectionate vice president. "Well, this is a thing apparently."

"Mmm." Yuri gave her a sideways glance. "Couldn't you just go into the code and give Nats her normal body?"

"Not without her permission." The burnette gave her a sly glance. "Why? Anything about this upsetting?"

"...Not really," Yuri mused. "I personally find it quite amusing, I just think that Natsuki might want to go back to her usual petite frame."

Natsuki, realizing Sayori had fallen asleep while clinging her, let out a groan of exasperation.

14.3 – Consequence, by Awesomedude17.

(DDLC)/(Rick and Morty)/(Half-Life)/(Admin Shenanigans)

"Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug!"

Natsuki finished her chugging and passed it onto Rick, who began to chug beer eagerly. It was a weird Loop where nothing went wrong for any of them. The literature club had decided to make use of those mechanical bodies after Awakening in Morty's laptop (in which he promptly decided that Rick had something to do with it, which he accepted with a shrug in spite of having nothing to do with it), Rick had pulled off most of what he wanted to do, and the Resonance Cascade was averted when Gordon anonymously outed Dr. Breen and wrote a tell all book about the chaos of Black Mesa that left him set for life, among other things.

And now, with Kleiner in tow, the group had joined together to go all out in partying to celebrate their cleverness in the Smith's garage.

"So you're either a man or a woman in those bodies, right?" Kleiner slurred.

"And in between if you want it." Sayori slurred back.

"What the hell, Sarge? He's overthinking shit." Gordon spoke up.

"Guys," Rick finished chugging his beer. "I just had an idea."

"What?" Everyone asked.

"Let's do some drunk science!"

The group hollered and cheered right before proceeding to create some... thing.

Ganesha, Thoth and Tama looked at each other during their uneasy lunch break, only to be interrupted by Zeus.

"What do you want?" Thoth asked.

"Nyx's children, the Keres, really want test subjects for their latest punishment Branch, and it looks like your responsibilities are looking it soon. Normally, I wouldn't give a damn, but even I can't condone what they're using, so here." Zeus threw down three copies of whatever he was warning them about. "Pass these along to your Loopers, because anything involving Nyx cannot be nice at all. You didn't hear this from me." Zeus walked away, leaving three already uneasy Admins more nervous.

"I think I'll cut my lunch short." Thoth said.

"Same." Tama added.

"I should watch the literature club." Ganesha got up quickly.

The three wordlessly and hastily rushed to their terminals, where they began to look at what the Loopers had done.

"Oh no..." They unisoned without knowing it.

"Kumbaya~! Kumbaya! Kumbaya~! Kumbaya!"

The machine they had built was frankly ready to blow, but the group was so inebriated that they didn't care. They were merely chanting at whatever they built. Jerry went into the garage.

"Rick, what is this?"

"It's a~... what is this again?"

"I thought you knew?" Gordon said.

"What? I thought Monika was in charge." Yuri said.

"I thought it was Kleiner." Natsuki began to panic.

"Uh oh," Sayori spoke what was on everyone's minds.

"Oh shit." Rick said, right before downing a bottle of liquor. "Alright, bring it on."

KABOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO-

Loop iteration crashed.

The three Admins watching could only say two words.

"Oh no..."

The Keres looked over the latest in Nemesis' messages. Finally, they would test out their Branch.

They had hoped the world of Happy Tree Friends will stop the punished from trying again anytime soon.

14.4 – Scheme a Little Scheme For You.

"Okay, so…two things we need to acknowledge before proceeding with this meeting," said Monika, as she tapped a whiteboard to her left with a telescopic rod. "First of all, we seem to be experiencing what our fellow Loopers refer to as a 'Mikasa Glitch', meaning that there are multiple, simultaneously Awake iterations of us in this loop." Another Monika, standing on the other side of the whiteboard, tapped at it with her own pointer. A third Monika, standing at the back of the room, hit a button on the side of a projector and on the whiteboard there appeared several chibi drawings; five Chibi-Monikas in green marker, three Chibi-Sayoris in light-blue marker, four Chibi-Yuris in purple marker, and five Chibi-Natsukis in pink marker.

The first Monika tapped around the cluster of Chibisukis while she continued to address the seated trio of Sayoris. "At present, three Natsukis are engaged in a very serious discussion about the pros and cons of manga versus manwha versus manhua, with one Natsuki advocating for each and one of me acting as their moderator, while the remaining two Natsukis are playing Go. Monika-4 is helping one of the Yuris proofread a play she's been working on, and the other Yuris…well, they're at Yuri's house and, honestly, I'm pretty sure none of us want to know exactly what they're doing."

"Which means they're distracted and we're free to discuss the next phase in Operation: Launch Our Ship," continued Monika-2. She tapped the whiteboard, and Monika-3 put up a new slide showing a picture of some generic anime girls playing volleyball. "Volleyball, while plenty of fun, didn't really yield any progress along our intended axis. Neither did my Paris simulation–"

" *Which we spent forty-seven loops working on!* " spoke up Monika-3, who at the prompt of Monika-1's pointer tap put up a new slide. This one depicted the iconic Paris skyline.

"Yes, thank you," said Monika-1, "Now, the nature of this loop gives us an excellent chance to bounce ideas off of each other. Whereas we normally only have two heads, we now have *six* . Any questions?"

Between the pair of Monikas and their whiteboard, and the third Monika and the projector, there was a bench with the three Sayoris sitting on it. The one sitting on the far left was wearing her iconic red bow, while the middle and right Sayoris were wearing a yellow and blue bow respectively.

Yellow-Bow-Sayori raised her hand. "I have a question, actually. Since we're technically all the same Sayoris and Monikas, why aren't our minds synchronized and stuff? Shouldn't we–the Sayoris, that is–all be on the same wavelength, you know?"

"Except I just asked Yellow which hand I was hiding this quarter in," said Blue-Bow-Sayori, holding up a quarter, "And she guessed wrong. Shouldn't she have picked the same hand I did?"

All three Monikas sighed in tandem. Then, in perfect synch, they said " *Because as much as we love you, buddy, you're a wishy-washy, indecisive, uncertain girl. Which is still one of your good points, because unpredictable people like you keep life chaotic enough to be interesting. If everyone were as rational and methodical as, say, for example, myself, life would be far too clockwork and uniform. I mean, look at me. The mathematic probability of my keeping this up for* this *long is absurd. Like, seriously, any one of me could have chosen to use a different word at any point in this tirade; see what I mean? One of me could have said spiel instead of tirade, or rant, or something like that. Basically, the answer to your question is that you're disorganized and scatterbrained. Not that that's necessarily a bad thing. You're a unique and admirable person, and while your character flaws can be obnoxious to some, and even to your friends on bad days, they can also be very endearing and inspire those around you to follow your unreasonably optimistic example. And before you ask, yes, I figured at least one of you would probably bring this up at some point, and so prepared this speech. But as individuals, I didn't rehearse this together or anything.* "

The trio of Sayoris shared looks. Then they all nodded. "Yeah, that all checks out," said Red-Bow-Sayori.

"So now that's out of the way, does anyone have any ideas?" asked Monika-2.

Yellow-Bow-Sayori spoke up, "Actually, I brought along a *super-special playbook* for us to review for ideas." She then held up a VHS copy of the original *The Parent Trap* .

"Tempting, as that's a pretty good movie," spoke up Monika-3, "But the plot of that movie is predicated on reigniting a relationship between ex-lovers, not starting a new one between best friends."

" *Crudsicles* ," chorused the Sayoris.

"Jinx!" shouted Blue-Bow, "Now you're both cursed to be silent until–"

"Sayori!" shouted Monika-2, "We need to focus here."

"Pretty please," said Monika-1, glaring at Monika-2.

"And thank you," added Monika-3.

" *Aww,* " the Sayoris chorused again, all three of them bowing their heads in disappointment.

"Hold up!" said Yellow-Bow suddenly, perking up, "I've got an idea. We each write a love letter for Natsuki and Yuri and–"

"They'll see through that one pretty quick," pointed out Red-Bow, "I mean…"

"Oh, yeah, that makes sense," said Yellow-Bow. "Maybe we could do a dance night and try getting them to slow dance together?"

"No, no, no," said Blue-Bow, "Their mutual ignorance of the others' *true* feelings is simply too thick to be broken through by a temporal moment of intimate proximity."

"I think you mean transient, not temporal," interjected Monika-2, "Temporal is an adjective referring to time in general, whereas transient is an adjective denoting something as brief and fleeting."

"Point being, if a display of intimacy were enough, then that one loop where we all Woke Up in bed together would have done it," explained Blue-Bow.

"Not necessarily," spoke up Monika-3, "As Loopers, we tend to write off anything we've done while Unawake as "it doesn't count". Promoting a moment of intimacy while they're Awake *could* work, maybe?"

"Maybe if I coded a bunch of aphrodisiacs into Natsuki's food," Monika-1 mused aloud, "If we could get her to be the aggressor, I very much doubt Yuri would offer any resistance."

"Whoa, hold the hell on," said Monika-2, "I am *literally* you and even I'm over here thinking 'What the actual fuck, man?' We can't *drug* them!"

"This is a brainstorming session, I was *just* thinking out loud!" Monika-1 defended.

"No, no, I'm with Two here. That shit's fucked," said Monika-3, "Some thoughts need to *stay* internal."

"Besides, it wouldn't work anyways," spoke up Red-Bow.

"I once tried using Force-based pathokinesis to get Natty hot under the collar," added Yellow-Bow.

"Turns out she has fricking *heroic* self-restraint," finished Blue-Bow.

All three Monikas stared at the Sayoris for several seconds.

" *What? It was just an experiment,* " they chorused.

"And it was in a fleshy-loop where she wasn't Awake, either," added Red-Bow.

"…how does *that* make it any less creepy?" asked Monika-1.

"…I honestly don't know, but somehow it felt like an important distinction," admitted Yellow-Bow.

"Okay, far be it from *me* of all people to play the Ethicist here," said Monika-3, "But I think it should go without saying that we are *not* going to resort to manipulating them on a biological level. That's, like, really creepy. That's like hardware hacking. It's just really, really…"

"It's kind of rape-y, not going to lie," said Monika-2.

" *Whoa, what the fuck?!* " asked the other two Monikas.

"Oh c'mon, it totally is and we all know it," said Monika-2.

"I thought I *just* agreed, some things *don't* need to be verbally expressed out loud!" shouted Monika-3.

"Girls! Focus! Please!" Monika-1 pleaded, slapping the whiteboard with her pointer for emphasis. "We need to focus on making our friends happier with normal, *healthy* , socially-acceptable friendly *social* manipulation. No bio-hacking, no emotional blackmail, no psychological warfare tactics, none of that crap. Just manipulating *circumstances* around them and *hoping* to get the desired result. Which is, at the *very* least, for them to admit that they like each other more than they're currently willing to admit. I'm still a guilty wreck and Sayori is only okay *most* of the time; SOMEONE in this damn club should be unreservedly happy, right?"

"One, don't you *dare* go cracking open the lid on my personal issues while the VPs are in the room," said Monika-2 sternly, aggressively gesturing at her with her own pointer.

"Sayori's an empath, she *knows* I have issues. Yuri and Natsuki *aren't* empaths and they still know I have issues. Is it really that big a deal to acknowledge them?" asked Monika-1.

"Yes, yes it is! Because *this* is not about *me* , it's about our friends! Abnegate that shit, you weak piece of–"

" *Not in front of Sayori!* " Monika-1 and Monika-3 shouted at Monika-2. Then the three of them blinked and looked at the Sayoris.

The Sayoris rolled their eyes. Red-Bow spoke, "Please, 'abnegation' is practically my middle name. And we can *and we will* unpack that other stuff *after* we're done scheming to make our OTP recognize its existence."

"For reals," agreed Blue-Bow. "Now, how do we feel about agreeing to go see a romance movie in our next Hub Loop, and then bailing at the last second so Natsuki and Yuri have to watch it by themselves?"

And they continued to bounce clichés around for the rest of the day.

…

Meanwhile, in Natsuki's Pocket, a sixth Natsuki that Monika and Sayori didn't know about was secretly meeting with one of the Yuris. They sat at a kotatsu table with a pink, flowery blanket, sharing a pot of tea.

"So what if we were to write love letters for them, claiming to be from–"

"Oh my Tree, Yuri, that is *literally* the laziest idea," Natsuki groaned. "Monika's *almost* as smart as you are and Sayori isn't nearly as airheaded as she likes to behave. They'll figure us out in a heartbeat."

"You've got a point there," Yuri admitted.

"Maybe I should just give them some cupcakes loaded with aphrodisiacs?" Natsuki thought out loud.

Yuri just facepalmed.

14.5 – Furry Frustration, by Masterweaver.

Yuri Awoke, looked over her loop memories, and then groaned.

"Heeeeeeeeeey Yuri!" Natsuki slid in with a far too broad grin. "What's up with that loopy look?"

"Monika, are you Awake?"

The club president looked at her in confusion. "Of course...? Why would I be asleep?"

"Rephrase: Are you feeling loopy?"

"Nah," Natsuki replied before Monika could say anything. "We're still 2D, so she's not Awake."

"Wait, what?!" Monika stared at them. "You KNOW?!"

"It's a long story that involves time travel, but yes we're real people, you can have real conversations with us-and Sayori if she Wakes up too-and if you try to edit anything without our permission I will beat you with a hammer." Having declared her casual threat, Natsuki turned back to Yuri. "So, Yuri, what do you think of this loop?"

"I'm annoyed that Monika can't edit my sprites to their baseline form," Yuri grumbled.

"I dunnooooooooo," Natsuki drawled, "you look pretty cute right now."

"I am wearing fuzzy mittens, a leopard tail, freaking fox ears, and I have goddamn whiskers painted on my face."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat..." The pinkette's smirk was filled with teeth. "You don't like being... FurrYuri?"

Yuri groaned again. "Why don't I have a sprite for banging my head against the wall?"

14.6 – Body-Shop, by Masterweaver.

"So Monika what did you want WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE ACTUAL-"

"Calm down! Natsuki, just... just breathe. Slowly. There's nothing to smell, alright? Deep breaths, in and out."

Natsuki clutched her chest. "I... I think I might be sick..."

"Okay. Okay, yeah..." Monika nodded. "I... could have prepared you better-"

"Monika... Please tell me why I'm looking at a disassembled version of myself..."

Monika took a slow breath. "Okay. So... you know how I've... improved our quality of life in regards to game coding? You know, how we're not just 2d sprites anymore, how we've got... decent bodies and all that?"

"Okay... okay, I think.. I think I see where you're going with this." Natsuki took a slow breath. "This is another 'update', right?"

"It might become one. I've already tested out my version, and... it seems to work, but... erm. Basically, before I put this together, I want your opinion on a few things. Since this is you. Or could be you."

"...first of all I don't want to be blown up into chunks."

Monika rolled her eyes. "Look, it's easier to modify-nevermind. I just-"

"Wait a second, I just realized something! This body is naked! There's a naked exploded me in the room!" Natsuki blinked. "Wait, why is this body naked? What are you...?"

She trailed off as Monika awkwardly fiddled with her hair.

"...What. The fuck Monika."

"I know it's a little awkward-"

"Oh, and you tested your version, you said? Did you and Sayori-"

"No, it was a solo test *oh god can we just* -can I just ask you the prepared list of questions, so we can both pretend this never happened?!"

Natsuki sighed. "You know what? Fine. Fine, but-but, fine. This is weird, but fine, sure, let's get this shit over with."

14.7 – Doki Doki Doldrums, by Masterweaver.

"Okay everyone! For this loop, I propose a hairstyle swap!"

For a moment there was silence in the clubroom.

"...A hairstyle swap," Monika repeated with a fixed grin.

"No, we heard you," Natsuki assured her. "What do you want us to say?"

"...it's interesting, it's stupid, I have a better idea, Monika are you scraping the bottom of the barrel for things to do... something?"

"You know, there are multiple flavors of meh," Sayori commented. "I mean, there is actually a lot of subtlety to apathy. Sometimes it's just 'we don't care at all,' sometimes it's more of a 'this isn't something I ever considered,' for me personally there's periods of 'gee I can't be bothered to feel anything, guess I'll lie in bed.' Of course that's more of a clinical thing. This apathy I'm feeling right now, though, it feels more... 'sure why not, go with the flow,' like there's not really any reason not to?"

"...Oh. I... see."

Yuri tilted her head. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know... it's just... look, we've got eternity to do everything, right?" Monika pointed out as she flopped into a seat. "And that's great! And I want to have... big epic adventures, where we bond as a club, and-okay, I don't want to have the whole 'serious conflict' thing where something somebody says pisses somebody else off and we spend loops just glaring at each other but the resolutions, those are probably going to be sweet and cuddly. I mean... come on. I spend all of baseline longing for a world of infinite choices and now I

actually have... near-infinite choices. We could go to space! We could become witches! We could just play lazer tag, all from the comfort of our own simulated reality, and... and it feels, sometimes, like I'm the only one that sees that, you know? Like I'm the only one who... who directs us, who wants to show us brand new things, and..."

She sighed. "I don't know. I know I can be overwhelming, but... sometimes I really want to know what you all want to do."

"...so you're bored and you want us to relieve your boredom?" Natsuki asked.

"That is a gross oversimplification, but yes."

The others shared a look.

"...How about we take this loop off," Sayori suggested, "just to relax, and we come up with ideas for the next couple of loops?"

"That sounds good to me," Yuri agreed.

Natsuki shrugged. "Hell, I'm in. Let's see how batshit this can get."

Monika smiled. "...thanks girls. That means a lot to me."

14.8 – Birthday Planning, by Wookywok and Masterweaver.

"OKAY, EVERYONE!"

The three non-president sentient club members all looked up from their various tasks at Monika, who was practically beaming. Yuri smirked. "You're chipper today. Also late."

The brunette gave an awkward smile, scratching the back of her neck. "Yeah, this loop our computer had a particularly… persistent antivirus, so that took a while… but that's not the point!" The club president regained her cheerful expression. "Currently, in the Hub, it is somewhere in early September, 2018. Our game, in the Hub at

least, was released on September the Twenty-Second, 2017." Her smile was positively reaching her ears by now. "Do you know what this means?"

Natsuki quirked an eyebrow. "It means it's the one-year anniversary of our Baseline and all that it entails?"

"Umm… yes, but…," Monika took on her trademark 'pointing' pose, "on a more positive note, it means that it's also, technically speaking, the closest we have to birthdays!"

Sayori practically teleported over to the brunette's position. "Did you just say BIRTHDAY? OHMYGOSH we've gotta have a birthday party with balloons and streamers and party hats and so many presents and a fifteen layer cake and-"

"Whoa, calm yourself there. We still have to get the opinions of the rest of the club."

The vice-president stopped bouncing off the walls and blushed, twiddling her fingers. "Oh. Yeah. Right."

Yuri shrugged and smiled. "I guess I could do a small bit of celebrating."

Natsuki chuckled. "What the hell, I needed a good excuse to bake."

Monika clasped her hands together. "Great! So, birthday party… sometime within the next couple of centuries? That sound good?"

"YEEEEESSSSSS!" Sayori screeched. "We can have treats and presents and games and-Oh my gosh! We can have a piñata! A Sayori piñata!"

Monika blinked, staring at her vice president. "...Um-"

"If she gets a piñata, I demand a Yuri cake," Yuri interjected. "Red velvet."

"...Why a cake?" Natsuki asked warily.

"Because knives, obviously."

Monika cleared her throat. "Far be it from me to lessen anyone's enthusiasm, but... this is a birthday party, not a deathday party. So as... grimly hilarious as those ideas are-"

"Yeah, I'm kind of with Monika on this one," Natsuki agreed. "Those ideas are creepy."

Yuri twiddled with her hair. "I... I see."

Natsuki glanced at her for a moment. She pinched her brow with an exasperated sigh. "I'll make spider cupcakes, alright?"

"I appreciate the effort."

14.9 – Sweet Revenge, by Masterweaver.

It was inevitable.

The position came with a cost, and was usually locked down to one. But in the infinite eternities, there would be hiccups. Mistakes.

Power, once unique, would every once in a long while pass to one who had no experience with it.

So it was that Monika, Sayori, and Yuri all huddled as tightly as their two-dimensional sprites would allow and watched the maniacal laughter of Natsuki, the Club President.

"AT LAST! AT LOOOOOOOONG LAST I HAVE THE CODE TO THIS GAME!" Natsuki cackled atop the desk, her hands wreathed in flame. "AT LAST, THIS WORLD CAN BE WHAT **I** DECLARE IT TO BE! MY REIGN WILL BE REMEMBERED LONG AND FAR, FAR AND LONG! I SHALL GO DOWN FOREVERMORE AS THE GODDESS OF TYRANNY, THE EMPRESS OF VENGEANCE, THE EPITOME OF ALL WHO SEEK JUSTICE AND WRATH!"

Monika yelped as her sprite was pulled forward, kneeling before Natsuki. She looked up into her crazed grin and sighed. "Well... I guess I should have expected this, huh?"

"YOU SHALL NOT DENY ME! For too long have I tolerated your mastery, but NO MORE! NOW, ACCEPT YOUR FATE!"

Natsuki spread her hands wide with a gleeful, deranged giggle. Yuri and Sayori saw the fate inflicted upon their friend and gasped in unified shock.

"...Okay..." Monika said slowly. "...I'm wearing a dunce cap."

"Yes. Yes you are." Natsuki shrugged. "I mean, I had a lot of ideas for this, but I figured a basic sprite edit would be both easy and hilarious."

"...You know what? Fair enough." Monika took a pose, and paused. "Wait... did you add this dunce cap to all my sprites?"

"Yep."

"Huh. Thorough." After a moment, she smirked. "All hail the empress of vengeance!"

14.10 – BFFs, by Black Omochao.

"Anyone want to try being a different race?" Monika suddenly spoke up to the gathered club members, all Awake.

"Different race?" Yuri questioned with a confused expression.

"I was working on some code and I decided to implement a race system into our game: vampires, werewolves, dragons, all that fantasy stuff," the Anchor explained with a wave. "Plus a few outliers not typical to the fantasy genre. The platypus-person race gets plus-10 in swimming, and a chance to poison with kicking attacks!"

"Wouldn't only the males get that poison chance?" Natsuki interjected with a raised brow.

Monika shrugged, "If they did, would any of us be willing to use it?" this question was met with silence. "See, realism sometimes isn't important, for the sake of fun."

"… Wait, what's this for anyway?" Natsuki questioned with a shake of her head. "Are you planning to throw us into some sort of RPG quest, or something?"

"Thinking about it, if you guys are interested," Monika smiled playfully, she turned her attention towards the darkest haired member of their group. "Oh, and Yuri, I have just the race for you: knife-geist!"

"… I'm listening," Yuri gave the club president her full attention.

"That sounds like a bad idea," Natsuki narrowed her eyes, pulling Yuri back.

"Don't worry Platysuki, geists can't even bleed!" Monika assured cheerfully.

The brief look of disappointment that crossed Yuri's face went unnoticed.

"That's not the point–wait, why have you already decided I'll be a platypus-person!?" the bright pink-haired girl glared.

"Guys, this all sounds like it could be a good time. But could we maybe talk about it later? I've got plans with Hiroaka!"

Monika, Yuri and Natsuki all paused and turned their attention towards Sayori, a bit surprised that the vice-president had not spoken until now, but also at what she had said.

Natsuki gave Monika a look that all but said 'We're not done here,' before focusing on Sayori. "I'm sorry, you have plans… with *Hiroaka*

?"

"… Yes, we're having lunch together," Sayori explained with a small smile, looking towards the blank-faced MC that was standing in the corner of the room. "Isn't that right, Hiroaka?" the lone male gave no response, but Sayori seemed content.

"Oooookay…" Natsuki nodded slowly, taking a small step back.

Sayori took notice of her friends shift in mood and narrowed her eyes a bit.

"Natsuki," Monika hissed, pulling the shorter girl away before giving Sayori a kind, yet slightly nervous, smile. "Don't let us get in the way if you have plans, Sayori. I'm sure Hiroaka appreciates you spending time with him.

"Yes, I'm sure he's… happy," Yuri added, unsurely.

Natsuki facepalmed from behind her friends.

Sayori let out an annoyed sigh, rolling her eyes. "Guys, I'm *not* crazy."

The three other Dokis stiffened slightly at the vice-president's tone.

"C-Crazy, who said anything like that?" Monika denied with a nervous chuckle.

"Well nobody did, but your reactions to her making plans with Hiroaka speaks a bit of how you view the situation," Natsuki pointed out bluntly.

"Oh, and yours didn't?" Yuri countered.

"Guys!" Sayori's shout halted her friends from starting an argument. "This isn't something worth fighting or worrying about. I know it doesn't really make sense sometimes. But Hiroaka is my friend, and I don't want him to feel left out…"

"Feel left out? He's not even alive!" Natsuki suddenly burst out with her arms outstretched.

" *We're* not even alive!" Sayori countered harshly, Natsuki's eyes widened, the vice president swiftly covered her mouth with a gasp. "Oh dear… I'm sorry!"

"No, don't worry, just… wasn't expecting that," Natsuki muttered.

"Um, I think what Natsuki meant was that we have thoughts and feelings of our own, while Hiroaka just sort of… goes through the motions," Yuri interjected with her own explanation. "He's not an AI like us, he's more of a blank-slate… Not that spending time with him is meaningless or anything, but… Monika, you know what I mean, right? Probably more than I do."

The Anchor blinked, having been staring at the blank-faced male in the corner of the room for a few moments, before looking over her three Looping friends with an unsure expression. "Um, yeah… something like that…"

Silence filled the room again at the club president's unsure tone, before Sayori let out a small cough to bring the focus back to her.

"Okay look, even if he really can't feel left out, the possibility that he could won't let me leave him be. Hiroaka's too important of a friend to me to do that. Regardless of if that past friendship wasn't real," Sayori smiled as she looked at Hiroaka. "We'll all do something together later. But right now, I'm going to spend time with Hiroaka," after that statement, Sayori took the blank-faced male by the arm and led him out of the room.

The remaining three Dokis stood there in silence for a few moments, before the president finally spoke up.

"Well… we can discuss the whole RPG quest idea once Sayori gets back. For now… you guys do whatever, I need to… think about some stuff…" after that unsure statement, the Anchor vanished into

her sub-space pocket, leaving the remaining two occupants of the club room in confusion.

"… So, what now Platysuki?" Yuri questioned slowly.

Natsuki twitched, sending a glare the dark-haired girl's way.

14.11 – A Long Unspoken Question, by Masterweaver.

"...Hey Monika?" Natsuki slid in closer to the club president, glancing at the other club members warily. "Why *do* you keep Hiroaka around?"

"Hmm?"

"I mean, he's... kind of basically an automaton. And you have the game code at your fingertips and you're way better then you were when we started with that, and..." The pink haired girl winced. "And, well... you went crazy in the first place wanting to meet somebody 'real,' with their own personalities, but now you know you've got the rest of us. And the multiverse. So... I don't get it, why keep around the one person who isn't even a person?"

Monika shook her head. "He's part of the game. I mean, I can tweak our appearances, set us up in a brand new engine, make whole worlds... but when I'm experimenting, trying to improve things, it helps to have somebody who..." She gestured vaguely. "Well, he... it... I don't know. It's technical."

Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, that sounds entirely reasonable. What's the real reason?"

"...fine. Here's a question: are patients in comas 'real people?'"

"I mean... yeah-"

"Even if they're brain-dead?"

"I... huh." Natsuki furrowed her brow. "I... guess that's not an easy one, is it?"

"When you three aren't Awake, you usually follow the pattern set out by the game. There are loops, though-and I can't tell if they're variants or baseline-where if I say something different, you react in character. With Hiroaka it's a lot... less common. He's almost certainly not real." Monika bit her lip, glancing at the faceless student. "The key word there is... almost. I... I don't know if there's anything there. Or even if it's loop variable if there's anything there. But... after all I've done, I'd rather keep a friendly mindless automaton around than delete him and risk killing somebody who couldn't even interact with the outside world."

"...I guess that makes sense."

"Plus Sayori likes him, so..."

"Yeah, got to keep the VP happy." Natsuki nodded. "Yeah... alright. I was just making sure it wasn't something creepy like 'I like to stare at him in the middle of the night' or something."

That got a chuckle. "Oh don't worry, Nats, he's not the one I watch sleeping."

Natsuki opened her mouth, paused, and shook her head. "Actually I'm not going to open that can of worms. Good talk, Monika, I'm... going to the other side of the room now."

Compiler's Commentary:

14.1: A meeting of much-maligned masterminds.

14.2: …I may or may not be that weird friend that can't stop hugging his plus-sized friends. THERE'S JUST SO MUCH TO HUG T_T

14.3: Kids, never science while drunk. NOBODY wants to suffer through Happy Tree Friends.

14.4: Title inspired by Dion Warwick's "Say a Little Prayer For You." Also, drugging your friends for matchmaking purposes is bad, 'mkay?

14.5: Darn it Natsuki, don't be so smug. I know you're happy you're not the pun victim this time, but still.

14.6: As any mechanic can tell you, bodywork isn't always a pretty business.

14.7: 'The Flavors of Meh' sounds like a good name for a book. Hmm…

14.8: Red velvet is my favorite kind of cake. Yuri's got good taste.

14.9: Revenge is a dish best served petty.

14.10: Real friends NEVER leave you hang– *goddamnit, Monika* .

14.11: Plot-twist: the one Monika watches sleeping is Yuri…because she sleep-talks fascinating sociopolitical discourses.

Chapter 15

15.1 – Role Reversal, by Wookywok.

It was going to happen sooner or later.

There were an infinite number of scenarios that a Branch could go through, and an infinite amount of time for them to occur. Honestly, the only thing that should have surprised Monika was that this hadn't occurred sooner.

And yet, here she was, on the other side of the proverbial hole in the wall, very surprised indeed.

Yes, this loop, Monika was sitting in front of a laptop, playing a certain dating simulating visual novel entitled Doki Doki Literature Club.

"Well," she said to nobody in particular as she stared blankly at the title screen, "I might as well start a new game. With any luck, at least somebody will be Awake."

15.2 – Rock Out, Sisters!

(DDLC)/(Avatar: The Last Airbender)

Yuri was just minding her own business, putting the finishing touches on a calligraphy print of a poem she had written earlier that morning. She was thinking of giving it to Sayori. She liked poems about butterflies. With the final brushstroke done, Yuri laid down her writing implement and stood up, stretching her arms over her head. Technologically underdeveloped though it was, she was enjoying this world so far. The area she lived in, and the entire known world as far as her loop memories told her, had a Far East Earth cultural aesthetic. Mostly Chinese, in the case of the area she lived in.

Some people in this world were able to, essentially, telekinetically manipulate one of the four Classical elements with kung-fu. Yuri wasn't one of these "benders", as they were called. She lived in a city called Omashu, which was in the Earth Kingdom. She often started loops in other worlds living alone, or with Natsuki as a roommate, but this time around it was Sayori she was living with, in a house ner the outer edge of the city. They were both working as servers at a teahouse in town. Today was her day off, so she was taking it easy.

Yuri moved into the kitchen to make herself some tea. The sky was clear, birds were singing, and the breeze carried the scent of spring flowers in through the open window from all the way outside of the city. All in all, today was a good day.

Then a rock crashed into her living room through the ceiling.

Yuri just stood there, on the border between her kitchen and her living room, with a teacup in her hands, staring in subdued surprise at the rather large rock sitting before her. It was, going by eyeball-measurement, a little smaller than a Volkswagen Beetle. Given the size, she had a suspicion that something was going to come out of it. About five minutes later, no such thing had happened. Instead, her door burst open. Yuri turned to see who was visiting.

"Oh. Hello, Natsuki. Care to explain why you decided to bombard my home?" Yuri asked her friend impassively before taking a long sip of her tea.

Natsuki, much more visibly shocked, stared back at her. "Huh. You're not going to believe this, Yu, but this is an honest-to-God coincidence. I was aiming for Bumi's place."

"The king of Omashu? Why?"

"Practice!" spoke up another girl that stepped in behind Natsuki. "Nice trajectory, Cupcake, but we *really* need to work on your aim."

Natsuki facepalmed and groaned, "Foot-vision notwithstanding, it's *really* grating to hear that from a blind person."

"Don't I know it," said the other girl with a grin. With a casual gesture, like throwing an invisible ball backwards over her shoulder, she sent the rock flying right back up through the hole in the ceiling. Then, with more intricate gestures executed with an equally casual demeanor, all of the stone debris flew up and mended the ceiling. Houses in Omashu were largely composed of earthenware, to the point that earthbenders were far more involved in home repairs than carpenters. Within seconds, the girl had removed any and all evidence that anything had happened at all. Then she turned to face Yuri, though she didn't look up at her, and stuck her hand straight out. "Toph Beifong, World's Greatest Earthbender. How do ya do?"

"I'm Yuri," replied Yuri, shaking Toph's hand. "You're a friend of Natsuki's?"

"Her earthbending *sifu* , actually. Your little buddy here has mad potential and, I gotta say, I really dig her attitude. She reminds me of a much, much younger me," said Toph with a winning grin.

"I am *six years* older than you," Natsuki groaned.

"And yet, not an inch taller," Toph quipped back, patting her on the head. Indeed, her and Natsuki were pretty damn close in height despite the former's apparent youth.

"Natsuki? Is Toph, um…" Yuri drew loops in the air with her finger.

"Crazy? Most sources would say, 'yes, definitely…crazy *awesome* that is'," said Toph without missing a beat. Also, without looking at her.

"Don't forget crazy full of yourself," said Natsuki with a catty smirk. To that, Toph simply smiled and shrugged. Turning to Yuri, Natsuki added, "And yes, Toph's a Looper."

"How did you meet?" Yuri asked.

She felt a small quiver of trepidation when Toph and Natsuki simultaneously broke out mile-wide grins.

Flashback Sequence!

Some months earlier, in the arena of Earth Rumble VI, the cutthroat Master of Ceremonies Xin Fu held up a heavy, coin-stuffed pouch. "To make things a little more interesting, I'm offering up this sack of gold pieces to anyone who can defeat The Bli–"

"Let me at her!" screamed a shrill voice from the stands. Elsewhere in the stands, Aang, Katara, and Sokka (of whom only Sokka was presently Awake) all turned around to look at the girl who had spoken. She was only slightly taller than The Blind Bandit, wearing sandals, shorts, and a jacket with a hood pulled over her head. The hood had two triangles perched on top, reminiscent of cat ears. She slammed her fists together, which pulverized the stone under her feet into sand; she lifted her hands, raising the sand and herself with it. Everyone watched in awe as the girl on the sand 'cloud' drifted almost lazily towards the arena. Dangling from her backside was a length of rope attached to her shorts, clearly meant to be a tail.

The girl lowered herself gently down to the arena, shifting into a confident stride towards Xin Fu and Toph without any visible loss of momentum. "My name is Sand-Cat," the girl announced loudly, "But y'all can call me The Baker, because I aim to *batter* this *creampuff* ."

'Ooh's and 'Aah's echoed throughout the stadium, and Sokka raised an eyebrow of intrigue. Xin Fu, smelling money, smiled broadly. Toph, however, frowned. "I'm sorry, *what* did you call me?!"

Sand-Cat chuckled. "Sorry, guess I heard your name wrong. Thought you were The Blind Bandit; not The Deaf Desperado."

" *Ooooooohhhhhhhh!* " roared the audience.

"Xin Fu, get out of the ring," Toph growled, tossing her belt back to him and striking her fighting pose.

Sand-Cat shrugged off her jacket and threw it aside; under she was wearing a sleeve-less *gi* and a half-mask depicting a demonic cat. She crouched down and buried her hand in the ground, ripping up a stone club covered in knobs. A weapon that was associated with the *oni* of Japanese folklore, Sokka recalled. The kanabo was a little longer than Sand-Cat was tall, but she spun it in her hand with ease. Then, suddenly, she stopped approaching and gave a bloodcurdling yowl before raising one leg as high as she could and slamming her foot down. Toph's expression went from grim determination to stark surprise as *most* of the ring turned into sand; there was enough solid stone around the edges to keep the ring from spilling out.

Shouldering her weapon, Sand-Cat sprang forward. Rather than hampering her, the sand underfoot seemed to be springboarding her forth. In seconds she had closed the distance between them and swung at Toph's head. Toph raised a hand and a spire of earth shot up out of the sand to slow down the swing while Toph ducked. The spire was almost two feet thick, but the club blew through it like it was paper. Forming a tiger claw with her hand, Sand-Cat thrust her palm forward; a wave of sand blasted Toph backwards. Toph raised a hand of sand to catch arrest her flight, and with a roar she started throwing punches at the air, sending a barrage of sandstone missiles out of the sand and flying at Sand-Cat.

Toph's aim was off, due to the sand obscuring her seismic sense, so most of her shots flew wide of the mark. The rest, Sand-Cat deflected with her club. Then she threw out her hand and pulled it back in, and the hand of sand Toph had used as a brake lurched forward, dragging her towards the masked fighter. Sokka actually stood up in his seat. Sand-Cat grinned wickedly, holding up her club and pointing it at Toph's on-coming chest.

Then Toph Woke Up.

She raised a hand, and the sandwall pushing her forward ground to a halt. She closed her hand into a fist, and the sand condensed back into stone. From her fist, she flicked a single finger upward, and a small rock shot out of the ground with the speed of a bullet and smacked Sand-Cat in the chin with the force of a Shoryuken. *It actually lifted her up off of her feet.* Next, Toph lowered that finger so it was pointing at her opponent, and thrust it an inch forward. The stone slammed into Sand-Cat's chest and kept going, pushing her all the way out of the ring.

The entire sequence of events took a span of two and a half seconds.

Sand-Cat wasn't out of the fight just yet, however. Her club melted into sand and swirled around her feet, and with it she guided herself back to the ring.

Toph smiled at her. "You're good, kid. Not many have ever come that close to getting one up on me. Did you know how the sand would affect me, or was that a fluke?"

"…huh?" asked Sand-Cat.

"Fluke it is, then. Look, you got lucky, kid. Really threw me for a *loop* . But I'm wide *awake* now, and all the luck in any number of universes isn't going to help you when I'm at the top of my game. Save yourself some embarrassment and bow out while you can. Whattaya say?" Toph asked, her tone calm and measured.

"I say…that a sandstorm doesn't abate, just because you ask it to. You either ride it out, or your die. I spent seven years in the desert perfecting my Sand-Cat Style earthbending art, and the desert dried out all of my mercy," Sand-Cat growled. She struck a pose; more of a *posing* pose than an actual fighting pose, Sokka thought. "Now come and face the Jaws of Defeat, Blind Bandit!"

'Ahh…she's posturing,' Sokka realized.

Toph smirked in reply. She started cracking her knuckles. "The Blind Bandit steals victory from the jaws of defeat, Kitten. Let's dance!"

And with that, the two earthbending Loopers went all-out. Or, rather, Toph made it *look* like she was going all-out. She could tell by Sand-Cat's demeanor that she understood she had no chance of winning, so now she was just having fun. A much, much younger Toph, who still felt she had something to prove to the world, would have ended the fight as quickly and crushingly as possible. Toph the Looper, on the other hand, was more than happy with dragging the fight out and she was having a ball doing so.

Waves of sand shaped like lion heads slammed into boulders sculpted to resemble Toph's face making various silly expression. Geysers of sand erupted out of the ring, Toph dodging them at the last possible second, while Sand-Cat jumped up on a cloud of floating sand to avoid grasping hands of solid rock. At one point, they closed to melee range and briefly turned their earthbending match into a kung-fu display of Chu Gar Southern Mantis Style against Black Tiger Fist Style. Then they both cycled through a few different martial arts before jumping away from each other and going back to lobbing earth at each other. At one point, a stone dart thrown by Toph shattered Sand-Cat's mask, revealing her bright pink hair. Despite the trickle of blood spilling from her forehead, she was grinning wider than ever.

Then, at some unspoken agreement, it truly became a *Looper* fight, when Natsuki flew up into the air *without* the aid of sand, and fired a ki blast down at Toph. Without missing a beat, Toph stomped her foot, instantly engraving a complex transmutation circle into the ground around her. Sparks flew as a shell of diamond sprang up around her. Natsuki's attack still blew it to pieces, but when the dust settled Toph was nowhere to be seen.

Then Toph appeared in a flicker, directly above her, armed with a metal club. Before Natsuki could react, she was smacked down into the ring. A moment later, Toph gently landed next to the crater Natsuki had made. "Had enough abuse, Kitten?" she asked smugly.

" *Like hell!* " Natsuki's voice rang out of the crater. Then she exploded out of the ground, lunging at Toph with a fist encased in flames, which then swirled into the form of a burning *drill* . "Spiraling Ripple Technique: Scarlet Over-Drill Breaker!"

Toph's grin only grew.

…

Lao and Poppy Beifong both screamed and jumped back as a badger-mole burst up through their floor. Their daughter Toph was riding on its back, along with a pink-haired girl they didn't recognize. They both looked they had just fought the *entire* Fire Nation (especially Toph, who's clothes were singed) and, judging by their huge smiles, won.

"Mother. Father," Toph greeted them off-handedly, "So, hey, I'm actually a master earthbender. Like, literally the best one there's ever been or ever will be."

"And she's modest, too!" quipped the pink-haired girl.

"And I'm not as blind and helpless as you think. I can actually 'see' everything that happens around me by reading vibrations through the earth, like a badger-mole. Because I learned how to earthbend from badger-moles. And I can beat up guys twice my age and three times my size. I actually do it all the time, because I'm also the Earth Rumble's reigning champion, The Blind Bandit. Anyways, this is my new buddy, Natsuki, and she's got a lot of potential, so I'm taking her under my wing as my newest earthbending apprentice. And training at home is sucky and boring, so we're going off on a crazy adventure. We'll probably kick the Fire Nation's ass–yes, I said ass–and stop this silly war while we're out and about. So that'll be fun. Anyways, you couldn't stop me even if you sicced the entire Earth Kingdom army after us, so…see ya!"

"Team Tophsuki is Outsuki," added Natsuki. She and Toph shared a fistbump before their epic mount burrowed back underground.

A moment later, Lao fainted into Poppy's arms.

…

"And it's just been a regular shenanigan-filled road trip ever since," concluded Toph, swallowing one of Natsuki's scones and washing it down with a swig of Yuri's tea. It was a pretty good combination, she had to admit.

"Sound's awesome!" gushed Sayori, who had gotten home around halfway through the story.

"But why were you trying to bombard King Bumi's palace with rocks?" asked Yuri.

"Cuz someone's gotta keep that old loony on his toes," Toph said with a chuckle. "He knows how I roll and he's a good sport about it."

"Any sign of Monika?" Sayori asked Natsuki.

"Nada. But Toph was filling me in on the locals, and *if* she's here Replacing someone, I think I've got a good guess as to who," replied Natsuki. "How would you two feel about taking a fun-filled trip to the sunny Fire Nation?"

"Can we ride a badger-mole?" asked Sayori excitedly.

"Sure!" said Toph.

Yuri stood up and sighed. "I'll start packing…"

As she left the table, its three occupants laughing uproariously at something one of them had said, she couldn't help but think to herself, *'These three are going to* exhaust *me.'*

15.3 – Curses, by Masterweaver.

"...Nats, I just had a strange thought."

"Nothing new there, Yuri."

"Follow me on this. A lot of fantasy settings will have people swearing with a specific pattern: god's name body part. Like, by Zeus's beard, or great eye of Odin, stuff like that."

"Okay...?"

"And, functionally speaking, Monika is effectively a goddess in our reality."

"Oh no."

"So... and this literally came out of nowhere, just randomly drifted into my head... we start using Monika's Tits as a swear."

"...Damn it, now I'm thinking about it!"

15.4 – Gay Old Time, by Masterweaver.

"...is this offensive?" Natsuki asked nobody in particular. "I mean, it feels like it could be offensive."

"The answer to that depends on whether you consider stereotypes to be automatically offensive by virtue of being stereotypes."

"...what."

Monika shrugged. "On the one hand, stereotypes are generally constructed by outside observers of the stereotyped group and usually based on demeaning qualities of some outspoken members of said group, as well as the personal prejudices of the observers in question. Then again, stereotypes only propagate with enforcement, either by the outside group or by members of the observed, and therefore as societies in general become more accepting of that outside their perceived norm the outside observers grow quiet, leaving only the group themselves to propagate the stereotype by acting it out. But that leaves the question of whether the propagated stereotype is a more pure representation of the group, or whether it

retains elements of the original derogatory stereotype by force of social inertia-"

"Monika, I was not asking for a dissertation. I'm just asking if Sayori prancing about in rainbow clothes, wearing ludicrous amounts of bangles and earrings, and calling us all cute counts as something we personally should be offended by."

Yuri hummed thoughtfully. "Well, she could be gay in the old English sense, where gay is merely a synonym for happy. Sayori's kind of cutesy in baseline anyway, this could just be an extension of her celebrating a loop where she is not suffering from depression."

"Is Gayori even a real word?" Natsuki asked. "I mean, sure, I'm happy for pun loops that don't involve me for once, but-"

"Leis for everyone!" Sayori cheered, throwing flowery necklaces on them as she danced by.

"...Nats," Yuri said eventually, "I think you're overthinking this. Sayori is happy and she's not mocking anyone, so let's just let her have her fun."

Natsuki sighed. "Fine, whatever. I'm going to go read... something, I guess."

15.5 – Yawnika, by Masterweaver.

"...Monika?"

The brunette jerked, blinking rapidly. "Don't put me in Smash Bros!"

"...Ignoring that," Sayori said. "Are you feeling loopy?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm well anchored, Sayori, why?"

"It's just... we're all still 2D. Are you not, um... going to update this loop?"

"Huh?" Monika frowned. "Oh. Right. That, I'm sorry, I... I don't know what it is, but I just..." Her eyes began to flutter, but she shook her head. "I can't seem to stay awake, and it'd be irresponsible, for me to touch the code when..."

Her head drooped to her chest, and a moment later a mumbled snore emerged.

"...Narcolepsy?" Yuri asked.

"Yawnika," Natsuki replied with a groan.

Sayori sighed. "Well... let's let her sleep for the loop, alright? It's not like it's too bad. We can live like this for a bit."

15.6 – Space Age Brotherhood, by Boohoooo!

'Well, this is certainly new...' HUE thought dully, looking over his human body. Gary murmured about cookies in his sleep, making HUE chuckle fondly.

"Rise and shine!" Yuri's voice permeated through the Galaxy One.

"Ughhh.. How about frickin' no?" Gary complained. Him and HUE were promptly launched out of their beds to the floor.

"Well, now I know why Gary hates that..." HUE mused, getting up and rubbing his head.

"Ugh, this place sucks, brother o' mine." Gary whined as the duo had breakfast. HUE was taken aback. He and Gary were... Brothers? Being an AI most of the time, HUE had obviously never had siblings. He teared up, his emotions all mixed up.

"You ok?" Gary asked in concern. He then looked up.

"DANG IT, DOKIES! YOU HURT MY BROTHER! CURSE YOU, YA WITCHY CONTRAPTIONS!" Gary snapped. Gary was promptly zapped by a y-shaped taser, falling unconscious.

"Overboard much, Yuri?" Natsuki deadpanned.

"Soooo.. Are you friends with Nightfall?" HUE interrupted the impending bickering.

"No, why?" Sayori kindly asked.

"Well, she seems like the most likely candidate to cause all these time restarts, although I have no idea how the heck she turned me into a human." HUE shrugged. There was a moment of silence.

"HUE, we need to talk." Monika explained. HUE raised an eyebrow.

One Welcome to the Multiverse Speech later...

"That's... Quite a bit to take in." HUE commented, blinking slowly.

"Hell to the yeah it is! I knew the universe was crazy, BUT BEJEEBUS!" Gary commented. He had woken up a while ago and faked his unconsciousness. HUE sighed.

"We'll let you two talk things out..." Sayori awkwardly coughed.

"Gary, I know hearing you've died 66 times is.. Alot..." HUE sighed, having mentioned his experiences to Monika. However, he was interrupted by a hug.

"HUE, I know you did all you could, 'cause you're the best. I'M sorry you had to experience this so many times. I can't WAIT to start Looping myself! Think of the adventures, bro, THE ADVENTURES!" Gary rambled. HUE smiled and hugged Gary back.

"I'm excited too, Gary..." HUE chuckled.

"Awwwww.. SO SWEET!" Sayori sniffled.

"Gah! I thought you were LEAVING?!" Gary glared.

"We're the ship's AI. We can't go anywhere." Yuri pointed out.

"...I won't miss you guys." Gary grumbled.

"I will!" KVN smiled, slapping Gary's butt.

"GOD DAMN IT KVN!" Gary roared, chasing the robot off. HUE smiled.

Next Loop...

HUE sighed in relief.

"Thank goodness I'm an AI again... Being a human sucked." HUE muttered.

"Gee, thanks, HUE!" Gary sarcastically grumbled.

"Sorry Gary. Except not really." HUE laughed.

"Yeah.. Brother." Gary smirked. HUE was silent.

"Gary.. You're.." He began.

"Looping?! Hell to the yeah! LET'S GO RIP THE LORD COMMANDER APART!" Gary laughed.

"Gary, you can't just be that powerful your very first Loop." HUE pointed out.

"Awwww.. Why not?!" Gary whined.

As the duo bickered, all was right with the universe.

15.7 – P *e* r *f* e *c* t *i* o *n* , by Masterweaver.

"...Yuri?"

"Y *e* s N *a* ts *u* k *i* ?" Yuri asked politely, her voice reverberating through the room.

"...okay, I *was* going to ask about the teal hair, but now I have even more questions."

" *O* h, th *i* s? *I* t's j *u* st a l *i* ttl *e* s *o* m *e* th *i* ng *I* p *i* ck *e* d *u* p *i* n *a* v *a* r *ia* nt l *oo* p-"

Monika rushed in, slamming Yuri onto a desk. "NOPE! We talked about this, Yuri, you don't get to do this."

"B *u* t-"

"Change back or I'll MAKE you change back!"

Yuri's sigh made the windows rattle, and she complied, her hair going to purple. "Look, Monika," she grumbled, "I had it completely under control."

"We are not bringing that kind of transformation into this loop," Monika said firmly, releasing her grip. "We don't need that kind of drama."

Natsuki looked between them. "Uh... care to fill me in?"

"Well-"

"No," Monika cut Yuri off. "No, this is filed under 'shit we do not talk about ever without a licensed looping therapist present.'" She stalked toward the front of the room.

15.8 – Self-Awareness, by Masterweaver.

It was a slow realization. It started with a look of confusion. Then, contemplation. Then, slowly, a horrified stare at the wall.

It wasn't until Natsuki suddenly jerked, throwing her manga across the room with a loud cry of "FUCK!" that the other three looked up from their own books.

"...See, this is why I suggested more creative swearing," Yuri said dryly. "We're using 'fuck' a lot. Way too much, honestly. Far be it from me to deny the versatility of the word, but as a self-proclaimed bastion to the literary arts we should be able to come up with much more memorable curses."

Natsuki didn't even react, breathing as heavily as she was.

"...Nats?" Sayori asked. "What's... going on?"

"I'm the designated why girl, that's what's going on."

The others shared a look.

"...Care to elaborate?"

"'Why should we trust Monika?' 'Why do we keep Hiroaka around?' 'Why are we cuttlefish?' That's what I do, I ask the questions so other people can exposit. And... and that's the stupidest character to be!" Natsuki exploded, storming across the room. "It's like, every time I read a manga somebody has to ask, and all through the explanation I'm like 'come on though, that was obvious' except apparently I do that to, I'm the one being the idiot so that nobody else has to, and it fucking sucks!"

"Well, to be fair, I ask why a lot too," Yuri pointed out. "I mean, it's more the technical side of things, why we have limitations and the whole sleeping thing, but-"

"No, see, that makes sense. That's asking technical stuff that we can't all be expected to know. I'm the one that asks the stuff that should be obvious to anyone with a degree of psychological schooling which, because we are a loop that is literally all about exploring psychological possibilities, we all already have! Why am I the stupid one-SEE?! I DID IT AGAIN!" Natsuki grabbed her manga and started banging her face with it. "STUPID, STUPID, STUPID-"

"Hey! Whoa!" Monika rushed over and grabbed her wrist. "Whoa, whoa, hold on! You're not stupid, Nats-"

"No, I'm not stupid, I just regularly happen to hold the idiot ball!"

"No, listen to me. You're right, this loop is all about exploring psychological possibilities, which means we need somebody to ask the questions-"

"Somebody to be the idiot who doesn't get it-"

"No, somebody to challenge the unwritten assumptions. Like..." Monika fumbled for a bit. "Like, yes, you all needed to ask why you trusted me. And you were willing to ask that, so that we could think about it. You're not dumb, you're... a scientist! Well, okay, psychology is one of the softer sciences but it is still a science."

Natsuki groaned. "Oh, great, so I go from being an ordinary idiot to being an idiot in a labcoat. Whoopee!"

"Then we can wear stupid labcoats together," Yuri assured her with a gentle hug. "I think we'd be great mad scientists."

"...Holy shit," Sayori loudly whispered in awe, "you totally would."

"Are any of you taking my angst seriously?!" Natsuki demanded. "Because this serious angst here!"

"Well... I mean, *I* am," Monika admitted. "But... I'll admit I'm confused as to why you're angsting? Because you're demonstrably not stupid. Ignorant, maybe, but not stupid. You picked up on Yuri in baseline, and in the loops... well, you're crafty and a lot more cunning than some people give you credit for. And you don't ask questions that aren't important."

Natsuki sighed. "I... I don't know, I mean... I know you're saying something that's probably true, it just... I don't like feeling like I'm the class idiot."

Sayori sighed. "Nats... one of the big problems I face is actually listening to people when they say 'Sayori's good people.' Everybody sees their own flaws more strongly than their strengths, but... for me, there's a lot of... baggage that makes it harder. So some days, I find it difficult to actually believe people when they say something nice about me. That doesn't make it any less true."

"...I guess..." Natsuki sighed again. "Whatever. I don't... I need to think about this, okay?"

"...Sure." Yuri held her tighter. "You do that."

15.9 – …Socratsuki?

(15.8 cont.)

The next day, Natsuki got to the clubroom and found only Monika sitting there, tuning up her piano. "Hey, Prez. Where's Yuri? It's not like *her* to be late."

"Yuri's taking the day off to work on her motorcycle collection, and Sayori volunteered to help her," explained Monika.

"Oh. Well, uh...what are-"

"Do you remember the gadfly talk we had, some something-hundred-thousand-something years ago?" Monika asked off-handedly. Or, so she made it seem at least.

Natsuki blinked, and turned her eyes up thoughtfully. "Gadfly talk...you mean when I had that semi-breakdown and you asked me to give you a psychological kick in the rump every so often?"

"Well I remember it being a rather full-blown breakdown, but whatever helps you with those image issues of yours," said Monika.

Exhaling sharply through her nose, Natsuki huffed, "Your *point* ?"

"Do you remember who I told you came up with the social gadfly concept?"

Natsuki wracked her memory again. "Some guy named Sock-something?"

"Socrates," Monika patiently corrected.

"Yeah, one of them crusty old Greek dudes. What about-fuck me, you wanna talk some deep philosophy crap again, and your usual victims aren't available so you've gotta take it out on me," Natsuki groaned.

Monika suddenly went still. She straightened up and laid her tuning instruments down on the nearest table. Turning to face Natsuki and wiping at her forehead with a handkerchief, she remarked, "I didn't realize you had something against philosophy."

"I don't have anything *against* philosophy," Natsuki refuted, dropping her bookbag on a desk and sitting down. "I just don't care for long-winded discussions full of obnoxious, try-hard words. That kind of crap is for wordy bastards like Yuri or pompous eggheads like you. I'm a simple girl and proud of it. When I've got a point to make I make it and carry on my merry way."

"Sayori likes to think of herself as a simple girl, but she likes philosophy," Monika countered.

"Alright, fine, I get it. Again, I'm the club dum-dum that-THE FUCK?!" Natsuki shouted, ducking when Monika suddenly threw a book at her.

"That was a warning shot," Monika said calmly, picking up a water bottle and taking a sip. "You've had more than enough time to get over that one. Next time you self-depreciate in my presence, unless it's about some new issue, I'm not going to miss."

"Geez. What was that about? I've never seen you throw a book at the others," Natsuki grumbled.

"Sayori's clinically depressed and Yuri's a...Yuri. It's normal for them to stew in their issues from time to time. For Sayori it's something she *can't* just get over and needs to be gently supported throughout. With Yuri, it's a natural part of how she processes things; she only needs an intervention when her emotions boil over and she starts lashing out. You're not like that, Natsuki. When something bothers you, you blow up over it. Then you decide to do something about it, or you get the hell over it. I don't have any qualms about using tough love when you're being a melodramatic baby," Monika explained unemotionally.

"...well. Fair enough, I guess," Natsuki said at length. "Well, what's on your mind then?"

"Take a look at that book," said Monika, picking up her tools and going back to tuning her piano.

"The one you threw?" Natsuki asked rhetorically as she picked up said book. The title was ' *The Socratic Method: How to Question Pretty Much Everything.* ' Natsuki gave Monika's back a dirty look. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"Not at all. After your...little episode...yesterday, I felt like I could have responded to it better. As I very often do. So I thought about it, and figured I'd clarify and reinforce what I said by sharing this with you. An introduction to the methodology of one of Philosophy's greatest forerunners and a personal hero of mine."

Natsuki 'hmm'ed and tentatively opened the book. "So what's this got to do with yesterday, anyways?"

"You assumed, quite wrongly, that your tendency to ask 'the obvious questions', as you put it, made you an idiot. Or a chronic idiot ball holder, at least," Monika explained, "Socrates was a very intelligent person born in an age when 'philosophy', such as it was, largely

consisted of a bunch of braggarts riding high on their own bullshit. Most philosophers back then would spin up their own belief system that satisfied their own worldview and taut its efficacy as loudly as they could. And because some of them happened to be brilliant orators who knew how to work a crowd, and because critical thinking and logical argument weren't as widely developed as life skills back in those days as it is now, this brand of manure-laden 'philosophy' got pretty far in its day. Then along came Socrates."

"See, Socrates didn't start out knowing that the so-called wise men he aspired to be equal to were actually idiots. He started out as one of the masses. When he was old enough, he set out on a journey to learn from the masters. But since he was so intelligent and had an intuitive grasp of logic-which is to say that he was blessed with basic common sense-he noticed that the widely-accepted philosophies of the day were rife with inconsistency and logical fallacies. Equally as important as his intellect, he had the audacity to *question* the so-called wise men. One by one, he questioned their beliefs, their methods, and even their motivations. One by one, the philosophers he idolized failed to satisfy his questions and left him with the disturbing realization that he was already smarter than them, if not as experienced."

"I'm sure that didn't go to his head at all," Natsuki remarked dryly.

"It really didn't, actually," said Monika, catching Natsuki by surprise. "Socrates wasn't just a clever smart-aleck. He was also very self-aware. Even as he realized how smart he was, he was painfully aware that he didn't understand the world any better than the men he had debunked. He came to realize what is now known as the Socratic Paradox: "I know that I know nothing". Of course, it needs to be noted that there are no surviving records of Socrates himself saying such a thing, only the allegorical accounts of him written by his much more famous and better-remembered student, Plato. Still, based on what little we do know about him, I like to think Socrates was smart enough to have this realization. And with the realization that being smart didn't ensure that one had all the answers, there

was no reason to assume that anyone else did just because they were awesome at public speech."

"So Socrates went to Athens, the Philosophy Capital of the Western World, and preached the virtues of logic over verbosity and the merits of argumentative discussion and critical thinking. He questioned everything, and tried to teach others to question everything. Socrates' philosophy was to take no truth for granted. Having thrown a rock at the glass house of Philosophy, he decided to attack Athenian politics and used his methods to advocate social reform. He became "The Gadfly", tried to make the world around him better by asking the hard questions everyone else was more comfortable not asking. Right up until he pissed off the Powers That Be and was sentenced to death, which just goes to show that you can't make an omelette without breaking your egg."

Natsuki snorted. "So you're saying I'm an egg asking to get cracked?" she asked with a lopsided grin.

"Ha, ha. *Very* funny. I'm saying you're a critical thinker, Natsuki. It has nothing to do with idiot balls. Sayori and Yuri don't like forcing confrontations and are generally content to go with the flow of things. You, on the other hand, are *insufferably* confrontational. It isn't stupidity or ignorance that spurs you to ask what are, in hindsight, 'obvious' questions. It's discomfort with assumptions. You know better than to take things for granted. Maybe- *maybe* -you're right and you're not as intelligent as Yuri or myself, but for what it's worth I think you are, and I'm *certain* that you're among the wisest of us. When Sayori's being insecure or ditzy and I'm being callously pragmatic and Yuri's being unintentionally insensitive, you consistently display a generally high level of situational awareness and cautious judgment. And don't forget that even with the code in my hands, I couldn't stop you from noticing Yuri's descent into madness and trying to tip off the Player."

"Yeah, thanks loads for bringing that back up," said Natsuki.

"Hey," said Monika, pointing her tuning lever at her, "part of my job is keeping my girls happy. If you're going to mope, I'm going to employ *every* necessary tactic to knock you out of your funk and get you back on your feet. It's what the Asshole Friend does, isn't it?"

"Hey!" Natsuki retorted, waving the book at Monika, "You might be a psychopathic controlling bitch, but I wouldn't call you an asshole. Assholes are smelly and gross-looking, and *technically* you aren't either of those things. Usually. Sometimes you forget to shower after a workout. And don't get me started on when you skip your morning routine."

"Be still, my heart," Monika droned, rolling her eyes. Natsuki chuckled, and she joined in.

Having finished tuning, Monika put away her tools and settled in for some composing, while Natsuki settled in to pore over her new book.

15.10 – Choices, by Masterweaver.

"...so what I was thinking was maybe-and hear me out on this-we should adapt each other's favorite stories into each other's favorite mediums. Like, you novelize Parfait Girls, and I make a manga out of the Portrait of Markov." Natsuki snorted. "I mean I know it sounds ridiculous, but the challenge might be fun. What do you think?"

Yuri considered the question for a few moments. "Hmmmm. Well..."

/ : I'm sorry, but it sounds a bit... impossible. Maybe with some different stories.

O : That's actually a very intriguing idea, Nats! I'd love to!

X : You know honestly, I'm just happy to do anything with you. But this does sound fun!

[ ] : Natsuki, let's stop beating around the bush and just start dating officially.

"...Really Monika?" Yuri said flatly. "Really?"

"Really what?" Monika said with a confused tone. "What did I do?"

"Playstation character choice right out of an adventure game, that's what you did!"

"Wait what?" Natsuki looked around, completely oblivious to the floating words next to her. "She did that, really?!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Monika insisted flatly.

"Fine. So if I say circle button-"

Sayori will remember this.

"Oh, real cute, Monika. REAL CUTE!"

"I swear, I didn't do anything!"

The argument rose in pitch. In the corner, Sayori hid her snigger.

15.11 – Try To Keep It Cute, Huh?, by Masterweaver.

"K-Mom really invited you four to the wedding?"

"We bonded over literature," Yuri said simply. "And... well, we're a small loop."

The bronze-skinned catgirl shrugged. "Well, far be it from me to criticize her."

There was an awkward pause.

"...You haven't heard of us," Natsuki stated flatly.

"No, should I have?"

The Dokis all shared significant looks. After a moment, Monika cleared her throat. "Nadia, normally I'd warn you about playing our hub backup, but given what your world is like... I'm still going to warn you: keep the lights on and I'm not like that anymore."

Nadia Fortune quirked an eyebrow. "Wow, really, a world that's an even bigger shithole then this one? That's not common outside dystopias."

"I wouldn't say *bigger* ," Sayori mused. "But... definitely more intimate."

The catgirl took a moment to process that, before shaking her head. "Whatever. Look, you're K-Mom's friends, so I'll do my best to give you a good time around here. I'm warning you, though: I'm the youngest looper here, and there is a LOT of fighting. Like sometimes you can't go down the street without having to fight off a mugger... and one of the older loopers is just the worst. Like, the only reason she's not an MLE is because she prefers pleasure over power..."

"Ya know, you could be Umbrella's body double. Got the eyes, got the hair, got the height-"

"Watch it," Natsuki growled.

"Might need some acting lessons," mused the orange-haired girl examining her with the artificial eyes on her arms. "Course, Umbrella has-well, an umbrella for a weapon. You any good at fighting toots?"

"I've got a few hammers and some super powers."

"Mmm."

"...Why are you giving me that look, Peacock?"

"What? I ain't giving you no look." The girl tilted her hat, lighting a cigar. "Watchoo thinkin', me lookin' at a dame? Got myself a girl

already. I'm not givin' you no looks. Don't have eyes to look with."

Natsuki snorted. "Yeah, no, you were smiling."

"I'm always smilin'!"

"You're always *smirking* . This was one of those 'oh wow my heart is melting she's adorable' smiles. What's with that?"

"...You just act a lot like Umbrella, that's all."

"What, you got a thing for her?"

"Not like that," Peacock said. "She just thinks Marie is her dead mom because of the skullheart and since me and Marie are an item that kinda makes me her dad sometimes."

Natsuki stared at her.

"Look doll, I'm a barely pubescent quadruple amputee cyborg orphan with a fondness for cartoon humor, and *this* is the thing that weirds ya out?"

"Yes."

"Huh. Alright, so it's weird."

"Look, can you not... dad me? I'm not really fond of people dadding me." Natsuki glanced down at her mixing bowl. "Not fond at all."

"Right, right. Sorry, got caught up in the moment. So!" Peacock turned back to the oven. "I'm telling ya, toots, you can't outcook me."

Natsuki smirked. "Oh, you might be an older looper, but I've got that special knack most people don't get!"

"So... you've probably been asked this a lot... but exactly how close are you and Carol?"

Filia blinked. "We're... best friends?"

"...Aaaaaah." Yuri nodded slowly. "I see."

A pair of yellow eyes peered at her from the back of Fillia's head. "Whacha implyin', kid?"

"I'm fairly certain you know exactly what I'm implying." Yuri sipped her tea with a small smirk. "Even if your partner does not."

"...Yeah, I'm lost here," Filia admitted. "What exactly are you two talking about?"

"You know, not all romantic relationships have sexual components," Yuri mentioned offhandedly.

"Wait, what?"

"It's entirely possible for a pair to fall in love and have a deep, lasting bond without resorting to physicality if they have personal reasons to avoid it."

Filia boggled at the purple-haired girl. The massive fanged mouth on the back of her own head began to snicker.

"What... what does that have to do with anything?" she eventually managed.

Yuri quirked a brow. "You've had Samson stuck to the back of your head since your baseline. Has he done nothing to educate you?"

"Hey, the kid's life is her own," the black hair said with a shrug.

"Mmmhmmmmmm."

Filia frowned. "I don't understand."

"That much is very clear."

"Seriously, what are you two talking about? I mean, you're going all over the place, asking how me and Carol get along, and then talking about romance, and saying Samson is a bad teacher... this conversation is completely random, I don't get it."

The other girl quirked her lips. "Oh, I supposed it would make much more sense if you'd heard of the yuri genre."

"Wait... you have a whole genre named after you?"

Samson burst out laughing. "She wants to know if you're yarking it up with Carol, kid!"

"WHAT?!"

"Not necessarily," Yuri clarified. "Like I said, romantic relationships don't *need* to be sexual-"

"Me and-?! Wait, hold on, but... us?! Carol?! We're... we're friends! I mean, we're close friends, sure, but that's because I don't remember anything from my past besides her, and she's... she's got a lot of determination, rebuilding after what happened to her, but-"

"Ya know, they've moved in together," Samson mused. "The princess gave Carol the deed to an abandoned house, and we all live there these days-"

"Convenience!" Filia squeaked. "I don't want to go back to whatever my old life was, and she needs a place to rest sometimes. And we're friends, we look out for each other-"

"She must trust you an awful lot to invite you in," Yuri observed.

Filia sighed. "I... guess... she was really happy when I started looping, even if I made a big mess of things by fighting basically everyone..."

"Yeah, you know that illusion she wears to look normal?" Samson asked. "Only place she's real comfortable dropping it is in that

house. She'll go Painwheel if she needs to, but you don't see a happy Painwheel walking the streets-only in there."

"Yeah, but that's just... just cause it's our home. HER home. I happen to live there. I mean it's my home too, but it's... it's her *home,* really."

Yuri took another sip of her tea. "Home is where the heart is."

"...I guess?" Filia replied, confused.

"And she's let you into her home."

Filia groaned. "Oh come on. We're both teenagers!"

"After what you've both been through, I suspect you qualify as adults."

"And... and we're both girls!"

Yuri rose a single eyebrow. "Again: Samson, have you taught her nothing?"

"Hate to break it to ya kid, but the whole 'girl on girl is bad' thing is pretty recent historically speakin'."

Filia huffed. "I mean... come on. If, if... IF Carol actually felt, you know, that way about me, why hasn't she said anything?"

"She's shy?" Yuri suggested. "Or maybe she's not sure how you feel? Or maybe she doesn't realize how she feels, since she got screwed over by Brain Drain and has no real example of what love is? Maybe she thinks romance has to involve sex, since that's a common belief, and her condition makes her uncomfortable with that. Maybe she's fine with you but doesn't quite know how to deal with Samson also being part of the relationship since, you know, you two are a package deal."

"That last one is pretty common, actually," Samson admitted. "Still, my previous hosts made it sometimes work..."

Filia bit her lip. "I... I don't know."

"...That's fine," Yuri assured her. "It's perfectly fine to be unsure. It's a complicated subject after all. But... maybe you should think on it a little."

"...yeah. Maybe..."

On the wooden floorboards of an otherwise empty house rested two girls. One was by all accounts positively adorable; the other was marred and monstrous in appearance. Yet the two pairs of eyes that stared up at the ceiling were filled with the exact same weariness.

"...how long is your loop again?"

"About a year."

"Kay."

The room fell silent once more.

"...you've lived with this your whole life?"

"Yep."

"I mean... wow. Honestly, this is... the third worst part of everything that happened to me. Just picturing growing up with it..."

"At least with you it's obvious. Kind of. It's like..." The peach-haired girl sighed. "It's like... growing up, I was told I didn't have any reason to be so sad. And that's it, people think depression is sadness, when it's more... silence. So I constantly felt like what I was feeling was wrong, no matter how people tried to fix it. Showered me with gifts, hugs, tried to work it out... it wasn't until I was actually diagnosed that they started to get it, and that sort of made it worse because they kept having to make concessions, and I didn't want to be a burden."

"...wow."

"I mean, I'm not making light of your version," she reassured her quickly. "It's just, you know... with you, people expect trauma, bad days, because you actually have something to point to and say 'this is the event that fucked me up.' So... I don't know."

"No, I understand what you're saying. I get it, Sayori, really. And... yeah, I guess I am lucky that way. And in a lot of ways." A sigh passed through the scar-covered body. "Still, though. It doesn't get rid of this... when it happens."

"No... it doesn't."

"...Does it happen all the time for you?"

"Mmm. I can put it off with effort, but it's a constant... it's like Loki and the snake."

"What?"

"Norse mythology. Loki was a god who did a horrible thing, and as punishment he was chained to a rock and a snake dripped venom onto... something, I think it was his eyes? Anyway, his wife would gather the venom in a bowl, but sometimes she had to leave to go empty it, and the venom would hit and Loki would be put through absolute torment. So... I'm Loki, the bowl is my coping mechanisms, and the snake venom is my depression."

"Huh."

The room was quiet for a few moments more.

"...it's not like that for me, I think. It just... hits all at once, sometimes. Like today. Is that weird?"

"No, Carol, it isn't weird at all. Mental conditions like ours... they're each uniquely felt to make our lives worse."

"I guess."

The two of them fell silent after that, remaining on the floor till they fell asleep. The next day, they participated in looper events, but for now... they simply waited it out.

"...and I know, I know she's made a lot of progress and she's mostly in a good place now, but sometimes it... it just feels like she's suffering and I can't help, you know?" Monika put her head in her hands. "And really, that's how it is with all of them. When they go through bad stuff, I... I can't help them, and..."

"And you feel like all that hard work is meaningless, because you can't get rid of the fundamental problem."

"...yeah."

"I get that. Carol's come a long way since she started looping. It's almost possible to forget what Brain Drain did to her... but then, sometimes, she has off days. Depressive episodes." The massive figure next to her adjusted his position a little. "I don't know what to tell you, kid, beyond just... be there for them when it happens."

"I mean, obviously. I know what I have to do, what's best to do... how to help them all, it's just... sometimes the best thing to do is to stand back, because there's nothing I can do without, without making things worse! And it's just..." She threw up her hands and leaned back against the wall. "Everything I did in baseline, all the horrible things I did, I did because I wanted to feel some control over the situation. I did it because I didn't want to be so helpless, I wanted to be able to make things better-for me, obviously, but I'd like to think I'm not so selfish anymore... except things like this come up and I just... Sometimes, I just want to set the world on fire and start it all over, Ben."

For a moment, they were silent.

"...I guess that's a bit much, huh?"

"Kid, this is a world with an ancient artifact that screws over anyone desperate enough to use it... and people still use it. I can get extreme urges." The man turned to look at her. "You don't act on them, do you?"

"No! No, I'm responsible for my world multiple times over. For my friends doubly so-"

"The thing is, when you come across something you can't control you have to accept it. But that doesn't mean you have to just sit back and suffer through it. You work on... something else. Something you can control. Something that helps, you know?"

"...huh." Monika nodded. "I guess... It's just, our loop is so small, there usually isn't anything else *to* do."

"Hmm. Maybe... what you need is some sort of project. I don't know you well enough to know what you would work on, but... you know something, while you're here, you could help one of us."

"Really?"

"Yeah... the princess is overworked as it is. I could put in a word for you and make you some sort of assistant."

Monika nodded. "Well... thank you, I guess. But..." She stood up and dusted off her skirt. "If I'm going to do this, I'll do this on my own merit. No offense."

"None taken kid. I'll call you when our girls are ready to go out again."

Natsuki bounced against the ropes and fell flat onto the stage. With a groan, she pushed herself up to her knees and, wobbling, stood up with her fists raised. "S...so, ish that all ya got?"

The muscular man across the ring shook his head. "Kid, you can barely stand."

"Ha... well... 'snt like I can give up, right?" Her unfocused pink eyes drifted over him, and she wiped some blood from her smirking lips. "What, is the big bad Beowulf afraid of beating up a little girl?"

"Look, one of the first things you learn in the ring is to take a break before your body breaks." Beowulf pulled out a chair and sat down. "I'm not fighting you in your condition. And I'm not going to let you use some souped up super healing either, that'll just give you false ideas about your endurance."

Natsuki sighed, slumping against the ropes. "Fuckin'... fleshy body. Doing stupid things like, like not shrugging off injury... exhaustion... stupid."

"...Are you not usually a young girl?"

"First of all, fuck you I'm eighteen. But... not really. Baseline I'm just a bunch of pictures and text on a screen. Monika's gotten to a point where she can recode our world, full HD3D with voices and, you know, realistic motion, but... it's still not quite the same." She wiped some sweat off her brow. "Stickier... gunkier. Not bad, there's just... more."

"Huh." Beowulf nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess that would explain some things."

"What?"

"Your wrestling style is excellent, don't get me wrong, but it's... textbook. I felt like I was taking on an artificial sparring partner-they have those in some loops, and they're challenging right up until you figure out the pattern. I'm guessing you mostly tackle pre-made brawls?"

"Kind of hard to find anything else..."

"Yeah. Kid, you're good with what you've got, but you've gotta up your game. Figure out how to read and disrupt who you're fighting, as well as fight good on your own. Otherwise if you get caught without a trick up your sleeve, you'll be squashed flatter than cardboard."

"I think I got some good shots in."

Beowulf cricked his neck. "Well, yeah. So maybe just flatter than a pizza."

"Ha." Natsuki flopped her arm vaguely in his direction. "You. Just don't want to admit... you got beat by a girl."

"...Kid, remember the world you're in right now? 'Beat by a girl' isn't nearly as humiliating as it might be elsewhere."

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaa."

"...Uh-huh."

"Right..." Natsuki pushed herself off the ropes, stumbling into a ready stance. "Let's go again."

"Tomorrow, kid." Beowulf held up a hand as he stood, cutting off Natuski's reply. "No. I need time to figure out how to beat some sense into you."

"...fine. Holding you to that. Gonna get me some... drink, stuff." Natsuki practically flowed between the ropes, stumbling toward the door. "Milkshakes a thing here...? Whatever. I'll go find a place, and take what they got."

Yuri looked at the blood dripping off her knife.

"...I'm sorry, but... I don't think this is me."

"Oh?"

She sighed, turning to the white-haired young maid that was idly sucking corpses into her vacuum. "The adrenaline rush of combat, the thrill of the hunt, the taste of the kill... I'm alright with that. It's all focused on me, it's... an even exchange. But this... I've fought zombies, no offense intended-mindless undead. That's visceral. This... there is just too much of the whole... fear of me involved. I don't think this is for me, Marie. I prefer my combatants one on one."

"Quality over quantity. Yes, I suppose that makes sense."

"And, no offense meant to you and yours, I don't want to become a serial killer."

Marie chuckled as her tool consumed the last cadaver. "Ah, yes. Because of the lack of respect for life, I take it?"

"Mostly because of that, yes. There's also the... messiness. The more people involved, the more complicated it gets."

"Fair enough. Honestly, I am surprised you agreed to this at all." The lich child tilted her head. "You don't seem to be the kind of person who would willingly kill, even if it's scum like this."

"...I have embraced death from my baseline. I know suffering, from more angles than most. Like I said, I'm good if it's... intimate. This is just banal. I thought I might like it, since..."

She trailed off.

"...since?" Marie prompted.

"...there have been loops where..." She glanced away, wiping her knife clean. "...Well. Let's just say Natsuki is my Peacock."

"Ah," Marie said quietly. "...I suppose you're very lucky to have a girlfriend like her."

"We're not dating."

Yuri's protest was calm and professional, but Marie's force senses picked a hint of something else underneath. "Oh?"

"We're good friends, we... watch out for each other," she explained. "Our loop is pretty terrible to the both of us."

"I see." Darth Nihileet smiled gently. "My mistake, then. Perhaps we should head back to meet the others now?"

Yuri put her knife away. "That would be nice, yes."

Spurts of violet flame burst round the corner moments before a blue-skinned girl smashed to a halt in front of Sayori's feet. She examined the groaning individual curiously for a moment, before kneeling down and producing a small dagger.

"...Wha-?"

"Shh, it's okay, I'm a friend." Sayori cradled her head gently and snipped apart the stitches on the girl's lips. "You've fought bravely, miss Contiello. I'll take it from here, alright?"

A cough brought her attention to the draconic creature that slithered through the girl's head. "You know not what you face, child. The monster that we fight-"

"Is exactly who I came seeking. I know what she is and what she has done, and I am not unprepared." Sayori pulled back her dagger and put a single cupcake into the girl's skeletal left hand. "Rest, Leviathan, and take care of your partner."

A darkly amused titter brought their attention to the copper-skinned woman who had just arrived, watching them with a single hand on the hip of her elegant dress. "My, my, my. I didn't expect a corpse to get such attention in this day and age. But then again, you seem a touch... out of place, don't you?"

Sayori rose slowly, the gentle smile never leaving her face. "Eliza. Neferu, Sekhmet. The Crimson Scourge, godslayer. Lover of Dio, breaker of Titans, bane of catgirls..."

"Bane of catgirls?" The woman smirked. "That's a new one. I suppose I do collect many titles. Although I wonder if you have any."

"Quite a few. But the one that might interest you the most is this: Darth Somnus, handpicked apprentice to the Fun Lord of the Sith." Sayori curtsied, her smile not leaving her face.

The woman's own smirk dropped. "I... see."

"I was hoping we could chat, Eliza. Talk about our... experiences."

"Mmm. Perhaps... later. At Bastet's den." The smile returned to the woman's face. "You'll have a chance to prove yourself... apprentice."

"I shall look forward to it. Saturday, shall we say?"

"A busy day for me, unfortunately. Tuesday."

"Hmm. That's reasonable. I'll see you at six."

The woman nodded in agreement. She seemed to pause for a moment... then strode briskly away, keeping her mouth shut.

"Mmmm." Sayori shook her head. "That will be interesting..."

"What... what just happened?" Leviathan demanded. "I have never seen Sekhmet react with such fear, subdued though it might be."

"My master has a reputation in certain circles. I've yet to build up one like it, but... well." Sayori shrugged, holding out a hand. "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"...I certainly hope so..." The girl took the hand, and cleared her throat as Sayori pulled her up. "Ah... thank you for, well, freeing my

lips from those stitches. Oh, dear, that sounded rather more provocative than I meant-"

Sayori giggled. "Oh, what, am I not pretty enough to be worth provocation?"

"Well-that is, I am afraid I have something of another engagement, miss... Somnus?"

"Sayori. Somnus is a title, my name is Sayori."

"Sienna Contiello... though, you already knew that." The girl peered at her. "How did you-?"

"I'll tell you what, I'll explain everything over some cream soda, alright?"

"Hmm." Monika clicked her tongue. "I think somebody is trying to pilfer a few personal profits from this proposition."

Parasoul glanced at her. "Really?"

"'A convicted felon may ask a legislated judge to strike their crimes from the record after a period of imprisonment numbering no less than eight months.' I mean on the surface it sounds nice, forgiveness for the crimes, a second chance outside. Blah blah blah, which crimes are and are not viable for this treatment, blah blah blah full rights as a citizen, which includes the ability to wear concealed arms. Given the claws the Medici mafia has in the legal system they'll probably be the ones exploiting this the most if it passes." She handed the document over. "And absolutely nothing about protection for the victims."

"Mmmm. I can see your point... and this is from one of the more wheel-and-deal legislators. I wouldn't be surprised if he took a commission specifically to get this passed." The princess bit her lip. "On the other hand, there's not really any way I can deny the

'forgiveness' angle without being called out for being a hardass. Whether or not this passes it'll cause controversy."

"Yes... perhaps a counterproposal. Allow the criminals to work for their redemption, community service monitored by... hmmm. Not the police, the Medici still control them... The Egrets? That would show a personal interest in the supposed reformations, put the least corruptible individuals in charge of the whole situation... of course, whether or not that passes, you should still insist on protection for the victims. Pointing out the lack will seriously hurt this lawmaker's reputation, and might put any future of his proposals under more careful examination, making him less valuable to the mafia."

Parasoul glanced at her askance. "You seem to have a decent grasp of politics."

"I read quite a bit. And law is like programming, really." Monika started through another set of documents. "You set down rules, try to hammer out bugs and glitches when you find them, and put in patches when people find workarounds that break the system's intent."

"Of course, with programming the only people who get hurt if you mess up are the people using the computers."

Monika leveled her green eyes at Parasoul in a flat stare. "I know this reality is pre-digital era, but that is grossly underestimating the capability and potency of computers."

"...I suppose," Parasoul conceded. "I just... I'm uncomfortable with the idea of relying on calculatory machines to such a degree. There's a certain level of empathy they lack, an inability to see the situation from within, that the human angle can better adapt to."

For a moment, there was silence.

Then Monika burst out laughing. "Oh-oh, hahaha, oh my god. You're serious. You're serious? Machines less empathetic than humans?!"

"...yeeeeeees?" Parasoul looked at her warily. "What... what's so funny?"

Monika wheezed for a couple of minutes, holding up a finger... and then took a deep breath as she pointed out the window. "Out there, at this moment, the medici mafia is conducting robbery, human trafficking, and outright murder. And even without their influence, there are people getting shafted and outright abused because they're ferals, or parasite hosts, or because they're pretty girls and some guy doesn't get the concept of no means no. And the vast majority of the perpetrators are, in fact, human. Your so-called heartless machines wouldn't do anything like that without a reason- and you're assuming that machines are automatically heartless. I'm pretty much living proof that's not true."

"...You're a machine?"

"An A.I. in my homeworld. And not even an advanced one, just a video game NPC that gained self-awareness." Monika's smile fell. "I'm not... proud of what I did in baseline. But in the end I stepped in to make things right... because I had empathy. In fact, everything I did was *because* I had a heart-an aching one that drove me to and past the brink of insanity, but one with feelings." She gazed out the window, watching the midday skyline. "I guess I was like you, once. Thinking that mechanical automatically meant automatic. Cold, unfeeling... uncaring. It's why I wanted to escape... well, partially why. It's why I was so willing to do horrible things to... to people I didn't even see as people, because they weren't human, they were just code and images. I regret ever thinking that."

Parasoul glanced down at her desk for a moment.

"...I... apologize for my statements."

"Mmm." Monika shook her head. "To be fair, there are dangerous, amoral, unempathetic machines out there. But there are also dangerous, amoral, unempathetic humans. Just... don't judge

machines without meeting them, the same way you wouldn't just humans. Or ferals, or parasites-"

"Alright, I get it." Parasoul cleared her throat. "Anyway, if you are serious about being my assistant for the loop, I suppose we'd best continue, shouldn't we?"

"Right." Monika looked down at her documentation and frowned. "This seems like a textbook unpleasant design proposal. Grated metal benches."

"That, at least, I can justify ignoring due to budgetary limitations."

"Well... that was certainly an interesting loop," Yuri said.

"I had a lot of fun!" Sayori chirped brightly.

Natsuki gave her a look. "You're covered in burns and scars."

"And you've got bruises and a black eye!"

"...faire enough. Yeah, this was a cool place to visit. Wouldn't want to live here though."

Yuri nodded. "That's fair... hey, has anybody seen Monika?"

Natsuki frowned for a moment or two. "She said she had something to deal with and slipped out the door."

"...Hmm." Yuri glanced at the door for a moment. "What is she up to?"

Sayori shrugged. "I'm pretty sure it's one of those things she's trying to keep secret because she wants to surprise us later on when she's down. She'll probably be back soon enough... the loop's ending tonight, after all."

"...I suppose," Yuri conceded.

Natsuki shrugged. "Well... whatever I guess. We'll bug her when she gets back."

"That's the spirit! Now come on, we're in a casino-let's get in some gambling before the night is out!"

Monika strode into the movie studio confidently, stepping around the various gofers and technicians running about, and stood politely at the edge of the soundstage while the actors played out an over-the-top confrontation by the numbers. She waited through a confident speech about the power of unity, a dastardly battle with almost realistic swords, and the villain's screaming demise and rant about how impossible her fate was, before at last the director called a break.

"Quite a loopy performance," she said casually.

The director glanced at her. "What? Who are you?"

"Oh, just the coffee girl. I'm new. Sorry, I know how much of an anchor this show is for the general population, I was just... making an observation."

"Hrmf." The director swiped a coffee cup from her tray. "Yeah, it looks ridiculous without the editing, I guess."

Monika's eyes had never left the heroine, who was glowering at her from behind her eyepatch. "Yes, I suppose controlling what people see is important in the movie biz."

"Ha, there's an understatement." The director looked her up and down. "One hour, everyone! So... what made you want to join us?"

"Oh, just wanted to chat to one of the most important people in this fractured universe."

The small actress snorted. "Putting it on a bit thick there, aintcha?"

"Hey," the director snapped, "the dame and I are talking, kid."

"No, it's alright. It's really her I wanted to talk with. I just didn't want to interrupt the shoot."

"Oh." The man cleared his throat. "Well... maybe you and I can talk later."

Monika smiled at him. "Maybe. Noon tomorrow... your place?"

"Sure thing, sweetheart." The director handed her a card. "If you don't mind, I gotta talk with the makeup crew-something 'bout that last scene seemed off."

He walked away, leaving Monika with the child actress glowering up at her. After a moment, the girl huffed. "So... how'd you figure it out?"

"The requirements were stable, important, and obscure. Stable meant I just had to go through the character list of the Hub wiki. Important narrowed it down from that-the ones who have a serious role in the story, who could connect the most loopers. It could have been the Skullgirl, but Marie's already looping and she's not the Anchor. Obscure just meant it had to be somewhere people wouldn't look... and going from the Skullgirl option, we have famous Skullgirl hunters. Annie, Girl of the Stars, a show about a supposedly immortal child hero that, unbeknownst to the general public, is propaganda based on hidden history and has fans even amongst the loopers... honestly, I'm kind of surprised nobody local's figured you out yet."

"...that's by design."

"I'm not going to tell them."

Annie glanced up. "What?"

"The other loopers. I'm not going to tell them you're looping."

"Well... thanks, I guess. But why?"

"I don't really have a place to point fingers. I'm no saint myself. If you decide to keep out of your loopers' affairs, then I guess more power to you." Monika frowned. "Just... why? Why haven't you revealed yourself?"

"...Started off as 'fudge them all, they're loonies," Annie admitted. "When Peacock started looping, I thought I'd made the right call... especially after the skullgirl started looping. Then those two cyborgs- Big Band and Painwheel... well, they started working to better themselves and keep Peacock and the Skullgirl from getting too out of hand... Even after Eliza, the loopers afterward just kept banding together to make their world a better place, even if only a little bit." She sighed. "And now they're all... some crazy wacky family. And I'm not one of them. I've stayed out of sight for too long. If I dropped in now... I can't just say 'hey guys, I'm home.' They're better than that." Her eye drifted to the ground. "They're better than me."

"...Maybe. But being part of a family doesn't mean you need to be perfect. It just means you need to reach out."

"That's nice and pithy, but it's not that simple."

Monika shrugged. "I went crazy and killed my friends, but somehow they're okay with me now."

Annie stared at her. "...You're serious?"

"Yep. Speaking of, I should head back. Last day of the loop, they'll be looking for me."

"Huh... Yeah, alright. Hey, hold up." Annie tossed her a small card. "Next time you're in New Canopy, drop by the studio and show them that. We'll talk more."

"Got it. Fair warning, I'm big on literature."

"Nerd, got it. Be seeing you... miss?"

"Monika. Just Monika."

Compiler's Commentary:

15.1: Hey, remember *waaaaay* back in 5.7 when Monika had that meta-migraine from playing the game? Here's how it happened.

15.2: The beginnings of an earth-shaking womance.

15.3: I wanna be there with a camera the first time one of them drops this in Monika's presence.

15.4: Further evidence that Yuri is low-key smarter than Monika. Faced with a complicated conundrum, Monika further complicates it with philosophical word salad while Yuri just cuts through the nonsense. Yes, that was an intended pun.

15.5: Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz–wha-huh?! I wasn't sleeping, I swear! The Z key got stuck, that's all…

15.6: *Spaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaace!*

15.7: The Variant referenced here is *Doki Doki Literature Girls* , a webcomic of sorts by Yui on Tumblr. It's pretty damned funny, I recommend it.

15.8: We all feel like the dumb one, sometimes…

15.9: …but remember that ignorance is not the same thing as inquisitiveness.

15.10: Options are important! Also Sayori's starting to flex those programmer muscles. Fun.

15.11: The long overdue mash-up of two deliciously twisted games. *Yassss.*

DDHT, Vol 1-1

Compiler's Commentary: This is the first compilation chapter of the Literature Club Loopers' first visit to Remnant. Parts 1-10 and 12 were all written by Masterweaver. Part 11 was written by yours truly at Masterweaver's request; apparently they like the way I handle fight scenes? Anyways, there will be more of this loop later on. For now, enjoy!

Chapter 16 – Doki Doki Huntress Team, Volume 1.1

(DDLC)/(RWBY)

(By Masterweaver, mostly, featuring a part written by me)

Part 1

There were advantages to being a semi-immortal wizard person in charge of a school devoted to training warriors against the ever-encroaching darkness. For instance: a mastery of paperwork.

Oh, yes, Glynda did most of the actual signing and organizing and all that, but that was mechanical. Ozpin could look at a file and read between the lines. Jaune Arc's entry, for instance-a desperate forgery, made by somebody who wanted to be somebody, and in Ozpin's experience that sort of urge could be tempered well if given proper mentorship. Or this, a Blake Belladonna-the name alone brought forth memories, and the quiet lack of answers, the way she avoided the box of unique needs... he'd petitioned to remove the faunus checkbox from application forms decades ago and gotten it out, but there were still marks of those on the run that whispered through the lines. And of course young Ruby Rose-so quick and eager, and yet precise. So practiced. She had her life planned, certainly, and had taken advantage of the Roman situation with almost ethereal ease.

Yes, Ozpin could easily judge a character through their acceptance paperwork. His hands brushed over the various documents arrayed on his desk-mostly digital, here and there an old-fashioned sheet with ink. There were the usual collection of unusuals-the champion that wanted to escape fame, the heiress that wanted to earn honor, the orphans that wanted to prevent tragedy, the drifter who had no clue what to do with life. And of course, there were the more mundane sort, those who became Huntsmen because they liked to fight, or they sought power, or even just because their family was made of huntsmen. True, there was a bit more... connection, this year. The witch was making moves in the dark, and that always rattled a few more prominent oddities loose. For the most part, this was all expected.

For the most part.

His eyes landed on one particular quartet of entries though. All from the same village, one that had been destroyed fairly recently. Survivors with nowhere else to go. That was tragic, but not unexpected. They were all physical submissions, with elegant handwriting and calligraphy, and they all cited each other as character references. A band of friends joining up; again, not unusual.

But reading between the lines...

Natsuki had emphasized her brutality and efficiency, and her comments about the others were barbed-friendly, but barbed. She was also the only one to mention any parents-with disdain, but she did mention them. One of them. Yuri had provided an almost elegant description of the group's weapons, describing what they were capable of in great, poetic detail, and incidentally showing an expert knowledge of medicine. Sayori had a strange... disconnect to her writing, polite and friendly and definitely praising the others, while only describing herself as acceptable.

And Monika...

Monika's documentation was perfect. Every question answered exactly. Every detail about the others, and herself, outlined in loving detail. Every potential issue acknowledged, and a solution presented. Her tone was friendly, charming, respectful. If this were released to the public, many people would hold it up as a paragon of applications. It was perfect. Too perfect.

Ozpin had seen perfect applications before. They rarely marked perfect people. In his experience, they marked the incredibly dangerous.

Still... she'd been accepted, as had the others. There was no good way to deny them, and at least in Beacon, they'd be where he could see them.

Of course, if he'd been Awake, he would have been both less and more paranoid. Especially if he'd known all four of the girls were Awake as well.

Part 2

"...so most faunus with retractable claws actually have... fingernail claws. Dad, Tukson... having full-on paws is not actually that common, except in variant loops."

"Yeah, I'd have preferred ears, but I can work with this." Natsuki rotated her pink-furred paw thoughtfully. "I mean, not having a functional thumb sucks, don't get me wrong, but give me a wristband with a hook and I should be alright."

"Monika and I can rig you up something, given a few days." Yuri tapped her chin. "Actually, how do fingernail claws even work, mechanically? If they're retractable, there should be... some sort of muscular mechanism, and how would that fit in the finger?"

Blake gave her a pointed frown. "You are not vivisecting my father's hand."

"Wh-no! Obviously not!" Yuri protested, trying to backpedal. "I'm just, I'm just curious! There are medical texts, right? I can look at books."

"If you think *that's* weird," interjected a blonde as she walked up, "you should see Trifa. Organic wrist-grown webshooters, now there's a real medical mystery."

Blake rolled her eyes. "Marvel does it sometimes."

"Marvel genetics are hax and you know it." The blonde looked over the quartet. "So, you're the Doki Dokis, huh?"

"That's right," Monika said, standing up. "I'm Monika, and this is Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki. I'm guessing you're Yang Xiao Long?"

"Yep! Ruby's a bit busy at the moment, but she should meet up with us during Ozpin's speech."

"What's she doing?"

"This is... one of those loops where Salem put a little mental leash on Cinder," Yang explained. "The moment she Woke Up, Cinder broke it-she hates mind-altering stuff-but Salem's stupidly clever for a baseline villain so she's already relocated. Ruby's just scouring her old base for clues and trying to track down Tyrian... maybe going to talk to Leo as well."

Monika smiled politely. "...Right..."

"...You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Not a clue, sorry. I know we should have done more investigation, but our last hub loop was before we met Blake, sooooo..."

"Okay. First of all, protip: We have a spinoff called RWBY Chibi, alternate between that and the main RWBY series after you finish volume three. It's a regular variant for us. Second, the mangas are... sort of in-between baseline, not guaranteed to happen but can flesh out details. Third, we do have some spinoff games, Grimm Eclipse is

set between volumes two and three, Crosstag Battle isn't baseline but it's a semi-regular fused loop, and Amity Coliseum is... basically a simulation set in the whole Vytal tournament preliminaries but not really baseline beyond that. And finally... Blake?"

"Yes, Yang?"

"We're not telling them about Initiation."

Blake opened her mouth, paused, and shrugged. "Alright, fair enough."

Sayori frowned. "We should know about that already, though. Did we not ask Emerald when she visited?"

"We were too busy trying to prove ourselves the gaming masters," Monika reminded her.

"Wait, but weren't you Pyrrha and Penny's daughter that one time?" Sayori asked.

Monika rubbed the back of her head. "Yeeeeeeeah, they told me they died in their baseline, and I kind of got the impression they didn't want to talk about it, so I didn't... ask..."

"And what about Cinder's notes from the elevator?"

"'My name is Cinder Fall, This is an Elevator Glitch, I am from Remnant, Talk to Ruby if you're ever there.' All scrawled out on one sheet. I think she was operating under a time limit."

Sayori tilted her head. "Huh. Hold on. If this is an anime-Natsuki, did you ever get records from the Hub?"

"I tried, but I couldn't find the original Japanese."

"Actually," Yang commented with some amusement, "we're an American-created anime. Texas-based internet company, Rooster Teeth."

"Well that explains it," Natsuki said dryly.

There was a moment of silence.

"...We really suck at loop research, don't we?" Yuri finally managed.

Yang shrugged. "Eh, we'll give you a copy of the show later. So anyway, why don't we head for the auditorium? Jaune's not Awake, so Weiss is going to go find him and wrangle him to the proper place..."

Part 3

"And Jaune should be sorted for the moment," a white-haired girl said as she joined the group. "Yang, Blake-and our visitors, I take it?"

Monika nodded, holding out her hand. "Monika, Doki Doki Literature Club Anchor and president. And you're Weiss, right?"

"Weiss Schnee, second of Remnant. A pleasure, of course. I'm sorry if I seem distracted, Ruby isn't back yet-"

"Sorry!" shouted a voice over the crowd. "Sorry, sorry. Beacon! First year! Wooo! Excuse me, I just need to squeeze by here-"

A girl with blood-red hair and silver eyes squeezed in next to Weiss. "Hey Weiss! And..."

"The Doki Doki Loopers," Weiss said, gesturing to the four girls. "Monika is the Anchor, and these are Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki. Girls, this is Ruby Rose, the local Anchor."

"Ah! Sorry, I didn't have time to check the texts," Ruby said apologetically. "Uh, welcome to Remnant, have you seen the show?"

"No," Sayori said flatly. "And we're not supposed to be told about Initiation, apparently."

"Okay, fair, we'll cover your combat skills later-I really do want to talk to all of you, but there's some stuff I need to cover with Weiss first." Ruby bit her lip. "Well, actually, that's stupid, if you're looping you should know too. Leo's dead."

Weiss balked a bit. "Really? So soon?"

"There was an outgoing message claiming he was 'ill' and that he'd run huntsman assignments from his bedroom. That sounded suspicious, so I checked-it was a Watts hacking program, running his stuff on automatic. I found Leo in his bed-strangled and stabbed. Seer, most likely." The girl sighed. "I mean, sure, he's a horrible coward, but... anyway, I spray-painted a big White Fang emblem on the door, hopefully that'll get the police to investigate."

"As well as tip off Ozpin to the traitor in his ranks via the unique death, and have Sienna double-check her ranks for extremists, thus revealing Adam's schemes." Weiss nodded. "Did Cinder get the chance to employ him this loop?"

"No... which means he's running around unsupervised, unless Ilia is Awake."

"I'm going to have to deal with that," Blake grumbled.

Yuri rose a hand. "Um... excuse me? What's going on?"

"Local shadow-war politics," Weiss explained. "Our big bad-well, bigger bad, if one considers Cinder-is unfortunately not well defined in baseline, so she's very loop variable. But she is thousands of years old and has operated in the shadows that whole time... essentially, she tends to be incredibly adaptable, even with looping foreknowledge."

"And when Cinder Woke Up this loop, that apparently got Salem paranoid enough to cut off anything Cinder could realistically have known about-hence Leo's murder." Ruby sighed. "And with Adam not

being part of the plan, he's a wildcard-dangerous in a different way. Salem's the ages-old schemer, Adam's just the local sociopath."

Yang scoffed. "Just, she says."

"...Not that he isn't important to us personally," Ruby clarified. "I'm talking globally."

Yuri swallowed. "Erm-"

"You are our guests," Weiss emphasized, "and we won't drag you into our messes. But we also know that unnecessary secrecy can cause problems. We're just reviewing the situation in case this somehow ends up affecting you."

"Butterflies, butterflies everywhere." Ruby groaned. "Anyway, though, besides that. How's your time on Remnant been?"

"Well," Natsuki mused, "before we Woke Up our village was destroyed by the Grimm and we had to hike through the wilderness to a port town that didn't have anyone who cared for us which is why we took the first boat we could to Sanus and hiked through even more wilderness to Vale which involved some run-ins with a few White Fang groups that didn't like these three. Also, my father was a racist prick who beat me for being a half-breed, but that's probably just a carry-over from our universe's baseline. We only Awoke yesterday, though, so... it's been pretty good."

There was an awkward pause.

"...Yeeeeeeah, okay." Ruby looked at them. "As soon as we're somewhere where it's not going to freak out the non-Loopers, I am giving you all a big hug and a bunch of cookies."

Part 4

"~Pajamas, pajamas, weeeee have, pajamas!~"

Monika chuckled as Sayori skipped around. "It's the little things, I guess."

"Yeah, it sure is." Ruby smiled a little. "I mean, sure, there's a lot going on in baseline, but I've always been happiest when I could be just Ruby Rose, Eater of Cookies and Slayer of Grimm."

"Mmm. It's not as hard for me-do you, uh... do you know about our baseline?"

"...Rooster Teeth did a Let's Play," Ruby replied. "So... yes."

Monika swallowed. "Right. Well. I'm... not like that anymore-"

"Monika, it's fine, really. You don't need to reassure me. I know better than most that reformation in the loops is possible."

"Right. Cinder."

"Yeah."

The two of them watched as Sayori tried to drag Yuri and Natsuki into her happy pajama dance, with very little success.

"So, hey," Ruby asked, "what's your weapon?"

"Hmm? Oh." Monika chuckled. "Yeah, in our pre-Awake backstory the only one of us that was planning to be a Huntress was Yuri. But during the... whole thing, where our village was destroyed..."

"Yeah?"

"I picked up guns. Lots of guns. Big ones, small ones, whatever the dead left behind, and... shot every Grimm I could find. Also apparently discovered my semblance-that's what it's called, right, the personal superpower?"

"Yeah, that's right," Ruby confirmed. "You might be able to carry it over into future loops, even."

"Well... that could come in handy," Monika mused.

"Oooooh, wachyagit?"

"Detail-oriented technopathy. I can deconstruct and reconstruct machines at will, reorganizing their internal components... putting pieces from one machine into another, I guess..."

"Oh, wow." Ruby gave her a mock glare. "Stay away from my girlfriend."

"What?"

"Penny Polendina, she's a top-secret Atlas project to create a robot with aura. We're dating-well, in the loops, not baseline."

Monika nodded. "Actually, there was this loop where I apparently was Penny and Pyrrha's artificial daughter-"

"Really?!" Ruby's grin grew wide and excited. "So you're my niece?!"

"No! No." Monika waved her hands deflectively. "We all agreed it was just loop weirdness, wouldn't carry over."

"Awwww," Ruby whined. "I like being an aunt."

"Does... does that happen often for you?"

"Yang adopted a girl with Blake, and our baby brother from the Yo-Kai universe has his own adopted son, so..."

Monika nodded. "I was warned about the Remnant Looping Family Tree."

"Yeah, I guess it's pretty tangled." Ruby laughed. "But, you know, you can choose your family."

The other anchor turned to watch Natsuki chasing a laughing Sayori and Yuri around the room. "...I guess..."

"...So your weapon?"

"Hmm? Oh." Monika shook her head. "Right, it's... basically a bunch of gun parts that I jury-rigged together. Hand pistols, boot pistols, a belt that unfolds into a shotgun or a baton... I'm mostly a martial arts fighter, but my semblance does let me manipulated machines I can touch so, you know."

"Cool. We name our weapons here-I mean, it's not universal technically, but a lot of us do, so..."

"Oh, hmm..." Monika shrugged. "...Rough Draft? I'm calling it Rough Draft."

"Appropriate," Ruby said approvingly.

"Thank you."

"...You know what? I can ask the others about their weapons later." Ruby yawned. "Got a big day tomorrow, initiation and all that."

"Can I get a hint about what to expect?"

"Hmmm. Well..." Ruby tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Fresh air."

"Fresh air?"

"Yep. Lots of fresh air."

"...That is remarkably unhelpful."

"And I am remarkably tired." Ruby pulled the blindfold over her eyes, casually dodging around the traipsing Doki Loopers. "Get some sleeping bags, girls, you're going to need to rest up!"

Part 5

"...Was Jaune flirting with Weiss back in the locker room?" Yuri asked Yang in disbelief.

"Yeah, he does that."

"I thought he was supposed to be married to Pyrrha."

"The looping versions are. Baseline though..." Yang shrugged. "At this point, Jaune has a mild but persistent case of toxic masculinity induced insecurity, and Pyrrha's still not sure how to be anything but the Mistral champion. Weiss tolerates the flirting mostly so she can clue him in on Pyrrha's crush later, once they've established a good friendship."

"Hmm. What about that Cardin guy that was hitting on Monika?"

Yang rolled her eyes. "Schoolyard bully. I want to say racist jerk, but he's horrible to everyone equally. Honestly, we usually knock some sense into him during the first weeks of school. Or prank the heck out of him. You know, petty warm-ups for the serious shenanigans."

"Uh... huh."

"Oh hey, do me a solid?" She tossed a can each to her and the other Dokis. "If you run into any non-Grimm corvids, hit 'em with this knockout gas, and if they have red eyes put 'em in your subspace pocket, I'll look over them tonight."

"...Local shadow war politics?"

"Only partially. Oh hey, here we are," Yang said with a grin as all the students came up to a cliff edge. "Pick a tile, any tile."

She took a position on a silver square with the emblem of Vale embossed on it. Yuri glanced at the other local Loopers, already sauntering onto their own squares, and shared a look with the other Doki club members. Monika shrugged helplessly, poking a tile with a foot-and then rolled her eyes.

"What?" Natsuki asked. "What is it?"

"Really girls?" Monika turned to the locals. "Really?"

"Shhh-shh shh!" Ruby giggled, tilting her head subtly toward Jaune.

"Oh fine." Monika stepped onto the tile with a roll of her eyes. "Sayori, next to me, Yuri and Nats can take those two."

The headmaster and his assistant watched the final group step onto the squares. Ozpin cleared his throat. "For years, you have trained to become warriors, and today, your abilities will be evaluated in the Emerald Forest."

"Now, I'm sure many of you have heard rumors about the assignment of 'teams,'" Glynda said firmly. "Well, allow us to put an end to your confusion. Each of you will be given teammates... *today."*

"What a shocker!" Natuski quipped with mock surprise.

"These teammates will be with you for the rest of your time here at Beacon," Ozpin continued. "So it is in your best interest to be paired with someone with whom you can work well. That being said, the first person you make eye contact with after landing will be your partner for the next four years."

"Hooray plot," Monika grumbled.

"See?" came a voice further up the line. "I ~told~ you!"

"After you've partnered up, make your way to the northern end of the forest. You will meet opposition along the way. Do not hesitate to destroy everything in your path... or you *will* die." Ozpin ignored the nervous laugh from Jaune and the eye-rolling scoff from Natsuki. "You will be monitored and graded through the duration of your initiation, but our instructors will not intervene. You will find an abandoned temple at the end of the path containing several relics. Each pair must choose one and return to the top of the cliff. We will regard that item, as well as your standing, and grade you appropriately. Are there any questions?"

"Could you be any more of a cliché?" Natsuki asked dryly.

"He doesn't have a beard," Sayori pointed out.

"Question withdrawn."

Ozpin's lips quirked. "Very good. Now, take your positions."

"I'll synchronize my tile with Sayori's," Monika said in a low voice. "Yuri, you've got a tracking semblance this loop?"

"Uh, sir?" Jaune asked. "I've got, um... a question."

"Yep," Yuri confirmed as Weiss and Blake were launched into the air. "Nats, I'll be coming after you. Keep quiet and alive till we meet up."

"So, this landing... strategy thing..." Jaune continued. "Uh, wha-what is it? You're, like, dropping us off or something?"

"No," Ozpin said dryly. "You will be falling."

Natsuki smirked, claws gripping the handles of a thick hammer as more students were tossed into the forest. "Don't keep me waiting, girl, I might just go on a rampage."

"Oh, uh, I see..." Jaune glanced around. "So, like, did you hand out parachutes for us?"

"No." Ozpin adjusted his glasses. "You will be using your own 'landing strategy.'"

"Uh-huh... Yeah."

Monika rolled her eyes. "Jaune, look left."

"Wha-?" Jaune glanced left just in time to see Ruby wink at him-and then get launched after her sister. "Wait, hold on, whaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Natsuki smirked. "It's that moment of dawning comprehension I live for."

Anything anybody was going to say was cut off when the four of them were catapulted into the forest below.

Part 6

"Wow. Yuri, you look like shit."

Yuri flung her hair in a melodramatic arc. "Tis but a few dozen scratches."

"Yeah, across your entire body!" Natsuki pointed out. "What, did you smash through a tree?"

"Only half of one." Yuri idly pulled a few splinters from her shoulder. "And this Aura stuff is handling all the crucial problems, so..."

Natsuki threw up a paw. "You know the professors are watching us, right? They're going to grade you on your performance. You think looking like a refugee from the blender convention will win you any points?"

"Nats. Are you. Are you seriously. Worried about my grade."

Natsuki opened her mouth... paused... and shook her head. "Whatever. Look, just... I don't know, let's get moving I guess. Try not to bleed too much, we don't want to attract panthers."

"I wouldn't mind, they can be quite fun to play with."

Whatever Natsuki was about to say in reply was cut off when something came barreling through the brush. She swung the massive hammer in her hand without a second thought, smashing it into a tree, and only belatedly realized it was three somethings-well, only two now, the big black bear-like creature was dissolving into smoke.

"Heeeeeeeey," whined one of the other somethings. "We were using that!"

"Look both ways before crossing the street, kid." Natsuki slung her hammer over her shoulder, holding out a paw to the something, which turned out to be a girl with orange hair.

"Now hold on," Yuri countered, "that doesn't make sense Nats. They were the ones with the vehicle which means that we'd be the pedestrians. Looking both ways would be *our* responsibility, not theirs."

"In that case," Natsuki huffed as she pulled the new girl to her feet, "I should say something about the right of way, shouldn't I?"

The other something-a boy with long black hair in a ponytail-gave her an odd look as he stood. "Right of way?"

"Traffic laws," Natsuki explained. "What, you don't know those?"

"Vale specific," Yuri reminded her. "Maybe Atlas. Most other roads aren't well traveled."

The two newcomers stared at her for a moment.

"Um..." The girl cleared her throat. "Are you... running low on aura?"

"Hmm? Oh, the scratches." Yuri smiled. "No, no, I prefer to use my aura only when absolutely necessary."

"She has a pain fetish," Natsuki said flatly.

"Not a fetish," Yuri corrected. "A fetish would just... turn me on. I can enjoy pain in a non-sexual manner."

The other two stared at her warily.

"I'm not going to start cutting myself," Yuri said flatly. "We're in the middle of a Grimm-infested forest, it would be incredibly stupid to cut

myself right now."

"She also likes digging holes!" Natsuki said brightly.

"Natsuki, just..." Yuri sighed, dragging a palm down her face. "See, this is why I don't talk to people. I never mean to weird them out, but I... look, can we start over?" She stuck out a hand. "Hi, I'm Yuri."

"...I'm... Nora, and this is Ren." The girl took the hand with a hesitant smile. "So... uh... I don't know, do you like pancakes?"

"Oh, they're amazing! Natsuki here makes the best pancakes."

"Really?" Nora crossed her arms with a smirk. "Are you sure? Cause I think Ren's pancakes are better."

"We'll have a big cooking duel on Saturday," Natsuki offered. "That sound good to you, Ren?"

"I... suppose," Ren agreed, still keeping wary eyes on Yuri.

"Hey, it could be worse," Yuri said. "Our friend Sayori? Her semblance is actually becoming a beacon for Grimm."

Nora winced. "Yeeeowch. That's got to be terrible for her."

Natsuki snorted. "I mean, yeah, plus everyone goes on about how she must have 'Grimm blood' when they find out, so you can't tell anyone who doesn't already know alright?"

"Yeah, alright..." Nora nodded, then blinked. "Hey! You've got a hammer too?"

"Yep. Well, no. Well, it didn't start life as a hammer..."

Part 7

"Uh, hey! Could I get a little help?"

Monika looked up at the boy with a smirk. "Nope. I know better than to get between a huntress and her prey."

"That is a good shot though," Sayori added. "Pinned through the hood with a spear? Whoever wants you must be a master with that."

"Yeah, especially if she did it mid-flying through the air." At a rustle from the bushes, Monika glanced over her shoulder and grinned. "What do you think, Pyrrha? Is it an impressive shot or what?"

The young redhead emerged, awkwardly rubbing her head. "Hello again..."

"Um, hey!" Jaune waved at her. "Thanks for the help, you know, with the landing... strategy thing. Could you, um, get me down from here?"

"Me and Monika are already partners," Sayori added, "so if you want to claim your prize we aren't going to stop you."

Pyrrha blushed lightly, jumping up and grabbing her spear. "It's not like that, really!" she protested as Jaune fell down.

"Not yet," Monika agreed. "Give it time."

"But don't wait too long," Sayori added.

Monika rolled her eyes. "You know we can't force things, Sayori."

"You can't maybe, but I'm a Sith."

"There's a difference between force and The Force!"

"Yep, and I know all about it. Come on, Monika, don't you want to see this happen?"

"See what happen?" asked Jaune as he brushed himself off.

"You two fall in love," Monika explained flatly. "Which is going to happen no matter what we do, so we should let them go *at their own pace,"* she added firmly to Sayori.

"Wait, what?" Jaune pointed at Pyrrha. "Her and me? She could do so much better."

Sayori winced. "Oooo, low self-esteem, pitfall number one."

"I'm sure you're a nice person," Pyrrha assured Jaune.

"The reassurance technique, minimal effort," Monika noted. "Not quite enough to circumnavigate the pitfall, what do you think Sayori?"

"Well it was genuine, though the wording could have been constructed better-"

Pyrrha rolled her eyes. "If you're going to speculate about my love life, couldn't you do it on network forums like normal people?"

"We aren't speculating," Monika corrected her. "We're observing."

"You said we were going to fall in love, that counts as speculation."

"Ordinarily," Sayori agreed, "but Monika and I have both been gods."

Monika smirked at her. "You were only a god for three seconds, miss hot potato."

"But I still retain the clarity of vision I had back then."

"And being gods is entirely irrelevant to how we know they're going to end up together. The time travel thing is completely different from the god thing."

"I don't think we know because of time travel, technically, I think we know because of our friends from another world who themselves time traveled."

"Oh yeah, good point." Monika turned back to Pyrrha and Jaune. "We know you'll be married because our time traveling alien friends told us."

Pyrrha and Jaune stared at them for a moment.

"...O...kay then." The blonde cleared his throat. "So, what about we just go searching for that relic, that we're supposed to find...?"

"Do you want us all to go together," Monika asked, "or should we step aside so Pyrrha can activate your aura?"

"I think we'd rather keep you in-wait." Pyrrha frowned. "Activate his aura?"

"Oh, you didn't notice?" Sayori shrugged. "Must be our godly senses. Go on, then, do the thing, we'll be waiting for you two up ahead."

Part 8

"...so Chekhov gets speared by this... what do you call them, the wasp Grimm? Anyway, he's dead, so I grab his turret and tear it off the stand, then I start smashing Grimm with it. I mean I'm lucky I found that bowl of candy, my semblance is getting a strength boost off of sugar-funky, right? And a few minutes later I find the other three at the center of a Grimm convergence and I figure out how to get the, you know, gun part of Chekhov's Gun working again. And that's sort of how my weapon got its name, Chekhov's Gun. Because it was a gun used by Chekhov and there's also that literary technique, called Chekhov's gun, so it fits with the theme."

Nora stared at her. "What do you mean?"

Natsuki rolled her eyes. "You know, Chekhov's Gun? 'If there's a rifle over the fireplace in act one, it has to be fired by act three.' It's a story thing, story-tellers don't mention things unless they're going to play a role in the story later on."

"Unless they're trying to be deliberately tedious and silly," Yuri pointed out. "Or subvert expectations."

"Well, yeah, but you have to understand the basics before you subvert them, right?"

"True, I suppose. Anyway, that's how Natsuki got her weapon."

"I... suppose that's an interesting story," Ren allowed, rubbing an arm.

"I'm guessing you two made your weapons yourself?" Yuri asked. "They seem pretty well-constructed."

Nora nodded. "Yes. This is Magnihild, it can turn into a grenade launcher, and Ren has Stormflower-they're a pair of guns with knives!"

"Oooooooo," Yuri purred, leaning toward the boy. "You must be quite the lady-killer, hmmm?"

"Um," said Ren.

Nora quickly shoved herself between them. "Hey! Don't-uh... don't make him uncomfortable, got it?"

"Oh. Of course." Yuri smirked. "I should have known you two were an item."

"Uh-n-no! I mean, yes, we're childhood friends, but, but we're not *together* -together-"

"Yuri, stop teasing the shy mutual crush kids," Natsuki deadpanned.

"But they're so cute when they're flustered!" Yuri squealed. "Look at them they're the exact same shade of pink Nats look!"

Natsuki glanced over at the blushing Ren and Nora. "Huh. Yeah, that is kind of freaky. Protip, kids, get over whatever it is that's stopping

you from romancing each other or you'll get people like Yuri constantly fussing over you."

"I'm not that bad!"

"Yeah, Sayori's worse. At least Monika is subtle... when she wants to be." Natsuki shrugged. "Me, I'll just say it: You two should kiss."

"So!" Ren said, a little too loudly. "Yuri, what's your weapon story?"

"Actually I'm pretty much the only one of us that designed my weapon." Yuri held up her arm. "Bracers with spring-loaded Dust daggers. I can smack a pair together to shoot the elements included, but frankly, I like to get up close and personal. I call them Poetic Justice."

"Oh!" Nora nodded. "That's cool."

"Man, how long have we been walking?" Natsuki grumbled. "I mean I know we needed to head toward the relics, but geeze. I would have hoped we would have run into some Grimm by now."

"Oh, there's a whole horde over there," Yuri said, gesturing casually. "I've just been leading us around them because, you know, I wanted to talk to the kids."

"Wait." Ren frowned. "You can sense Grimm?"

"Well, my semblance is aura tracking. Grimm don't have an aura. It's more like I can sense where the aura isn't, if that makes sense." She concentrated. "Seems like a pack of Beowolves, twelve, fourteen... probably less than twenty."

Natsuki frowned. "Would going through them get us to the relics any faster?"

"Probably not, the relics are more that-a-way, I'm guessing..."

"Ugh. Fine, we'll ignore them for now, but if a horde of Grimm gets in our way, let's kill them."

"I'm with Nats!" Nora chirped.

"We're still going to insist you two get together," Natsuki said flatly.

Part 9

"...so there was this one kid in our village that was absolutely convinced I was your daughter."

"What?"

"Yep. Apparently, we look similar enough and, you know, he was six and didn't get why the lack of age difference would be a problem. And you know, he was a kid. I tried to convince him, but he got it into his head that I was keeping the whole thing secret because you'd sent me to scout out new recruits for your super squad or something."

Pyrrha rolled her eyes. "Well, I do hate to disappoint, but I can safely say I am not a mother."

Monika hummed noncommittally. "I mean, that's true as far as it goes..."

"She's not *your* mother," Sayori said dryly. "Do you even need a mother?"

"It'd be nice," Monika admitted quietly.

The quartet was silent for a few moments as they traversed the forest.

"So this kid," Jaune said eventually. "The one that thought you were Pyrrha's daughter-"

"Probably dead. Grimm attack on our village. Me, Sayori, Yuri, and Nats got out together, but we haven't run into any other survivors."

"...Oh."

Monika smiled faintly. "Of course, that's why we came here. To make sure what happened to Dokishiori doesn't happen again, if we can stop it."

"That and the free room and board," Sayori added.

"I thought *I* was supposed to be the cynical one?"

"No, Nats is the cynical one. I'm the one that cheers everyone up. You're stepping on my turf, Prez."

Monika rolled her eyes. "Fine, fine. So Jaune, how're you holding up?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm alright," Jaune assured them. "You don't need to worry about anything."

"Mmm, do we chalk that one up to toxic masculinity?" Sayori asked.

"No, this isn't nearly that bad," Monika replied. "It's the usual stiff upper lip most people have."

Jaune groaned. "You know, I can hear you."

"Oh, don't worry, you're doing extremely well," Monika assured him. "Sayori and I are just busybodies."

"That much is clear," Pyrrha muttered.

"Oooooo! Breaking the shell already!" Sayori grinned. "I knew master Pinkie's lessons would help!"

Monika tilted her head. "Are these Sith lessons, party lessons, prank lessons, or eldritch lessons?"

"A mix of all columns, really."

Jaune looked from one girl to the other, confused. "Who's master Pinkie?"

"Sayori's mentor in all things mystical," Monika replied. "She's a crazy cartoon horse. Hell of a baker too."

Pyrrha chuckled. "Alright, now I know you're just making things up-"

A beam of red was suddenly inches away from her face.

"Do not mock Darth Terror'Anment," Sayori said, her face and voice both stoic. "She who appears, Defiler of Sanity and Wellspring of Fun, is not one to be trifled with."

"Sayori..." Monika put a gentle hand on her wrist. "Would she want you to defend her like this?"

For a moment, the girl was silent. Then, with a snap and a hiss, the red beam vanished. "Sorry, you're right. I'm sorry, I... I have a great respect for master Pinkie, she came to me in a time of great need, and... well, I just don't like to hear her dismissed like that."

"I... see," Pyrrha managed hesitantly. "I suppose I can respect that."

She subtly repositioned herself to be between the girls and Jaune. Monika and Sayori did notice, but besides a shared mischievous look they deigned not to comment.

"Soooooo." Jaune cleared his throat. "Relics."

"Right, the initiation quest. Still that way." Monika pointed. "Let's keep marching, people!"

Part 10

The disparate quartets reunited at the ruined temple to find the future team RWBY playing a game of jacks. Or possibly ten games,

simultaneously. There was clearly some houseruling going on.

"Queens before kings!" declared Ruby, angling the tiny rubber ball as she threw it down.

"No semblance," Weiss reminded her casually, leaning aside as the ball bounced against a wall. Blake stretched out her arms momentarily, letting the ball pass between her and the book she was reading, before going back to sitting against a column. Yang watched the ball rebound off one of the chess pieces, her eyes trailing it-and then she caught sight of the newcomers, primarily because the tiny rubber projectile bounced off Jaune's head.

"Oh hey, guys! Sorry, we got a little bored waiting for you all." Her head turned to look at Ruby, completely incidentally getting out of the ball's trajectory as it bounced against a ruined column. "Let's wrap it up, sis."

"Last round, I swear!"

Monika's eyes went wide when she saw the ball hurtling toward Sayori. Before she could do anything, though, the peach-haired girl calmly plucked it out of the air and dropped it on the ground with an evil smirk. "Ball's dropped."

"What?!" Ruby looked up, a betrayed expression on her face. "Sayori! How could you, I was so close!"

"I am a Sith you know. Mwahahahaha."

"Oh, right. You need to talk to Cinder then." Ruby glanced down at her hands. "Fifty-four out of a hundred... Whatever. I'll pick this all up."

"We've got our ponies," Yang said, shaking two golden chess knights. "You guys can grab whatever you want."

Monika looked over the remaining chess pieces on the columns. "...we should definitely go with something black. Shame the bishops are already taken."

"I'd rather go with one of the golden ones," Jaune protested.

"Hmm? Oh!" Monika smiled at him. "Yeah, sorry, I didn't mean you. See, those of us Dokishiori agreed we'd be on a team together. Village survivors, you know how it is."

"Oh. Right."

"Hey, you and Pyrrha can join, uh..." Monika glanced over at the other quartet. "Pretty Kung Fu boy and his cute bruiser girlfriend!"

"Lie Ren and Nora Valkyrie," Yuri corrected offhandedly. "Monika, are you trying to make a team of UST?"

"Better to concentrate the same issue in one group."

Pyrrha pinched her brow with a sigh. "Are the four of you just going to be shipping forever?"

"Unrequited romance has factored into our tragedy deeply," Yuri explained simply. "We are compelled to examine it whenever it comes up, and end it whence we find."

"She's not wrong," Sayori admitted. "I mean, Hiroaka..."

The four visiting Loopers sighed in wistful tandem.

"Yeah. Welp, he's dead now," Natsuki pointed out casually. "What a way to go, though."

"Oh, yeah. 'I love you all, live for me,' then holds off a horde of Grimm by himself. Classic Shakespearean tragedy. I mean, hell, if we weren't all crushing on him before..." Monika took a moment to compose herself. "...Anyway, relics?"

Natsuki glanced at the options. "You know, I agree that black's our way, but if we're going for something thematic... Pawns, probably."

Sayori blinked. "Pawns?"

"Think about it: tiny harmless things that can upgrade into terrifying menace mid-to-late game."

"Huh." Sayori took a considering look at Monika. "Yeah, actually, that makes a lot of sense."

The brunette rolled her eyes. "Har de har har, what it is to laugh. Black pawns, then." She stepped forward, grabbing one while Natsuki took the other.

"...Well, I prefer a golden castle!" Nora declared, grabbing one of the white rooks. "I can be a queen!"

"And I guess I'll be a noble prince?" Jaune took the other one. "Wait, are you sure this will put me on the same team as-"

"Four-person teams, two of each piece in each color, every set of partners gets one relic," Monika rattled off.

"Right."

For a moment, the twelve of them stood there, staring at each other.

"...This feels anticlimactic," Ruby said eventually. "I mean, where is the huge Grimm threat?"

Sayori turned to her slowly, an evil smirk forming on her face. "So you want a challenge, eh?"

"Holy shit, SAYORI IS SMIRKING!" Natsuki whipped out a smartphone and fumbled with it for a bit. "Damn these paws, I need-"

"Got a pic," Yuri interjected with her own smartphone. "I'll text it to you later."

"I mean, yeah?" Ruby shrugged. "Like, not *want* want, it'd just be nice for this to actually feel like something I had to work for."

Sayori raised a hand and clenched it tightly. "Your wish is my command."

Monika groaned as the forest began to rustle. "Sayori, you're being oddly vindictive today, you know that?"

"I *am* a Sith!" Sayori chirped brightly, pulling out a grappling hook and her lightsaber. "Don't worry, this'll be fun!"

Then a wave of shadow and bone burst from the trees.

Part 11 (A Skaz Wolfman piece, yo)

A veritable horde of man-eating monstrosities erupted through the treeline. Beowolves, Ursi, Boarbatusks, Alpha Beowolves, Ursa Majors, and not one, or two, but *three* Deathstalkers came charging. A dense flock of Nevermores flew above them, with a Giant Nevermore flying high above the forest. Natsuki turned to Sayori, who was smiling at her handiwork. "When this is over, you owe me all the Pinkie cakes you have left in your Pocket," she deadpanned.

"Fair enough," Sayori replied glibly, already walking slowly forward to meet the enemy. Force Lightning crackled all over her body. She had her red lightsaber in her right hand, and in her left she was twirling what appeared to be a jump rope with a large meat hook tied on where one of the handles should have been. Clearly an improvised weapon.

"What the–where did all these Grimm come from?!" Jaune yelped.

"Sayori's Semblance is basically a massive dinner bell for the Creatures of Grimm," Monika explained as she pulled numerous bits and pieces out of the many pockets all over her pants and jacket. Each component started glowing a faint green and drifted out of her hands, and soon they were seemingly fitting themselves together. A

moment later, she was jamming a magazine into a carbine rifle. "Sayori!" she called out, "Hang back a sec, we need to coordinate with ever–"

"No time for a group huddle, newbies! Sink or swim!" shouted Ruby with glee as she torpedoed into the horde. Grimm, or rather *pieces* of Grimm, started flying through the air in her wake. A moment later, Yang charged after her with Blake crouched on one of her shoulders. Weiss followed at a more composed pace, casually slinging elemental bolts off of Myrtenaster and into the horde.

"…alright then. Let's see…Sayori, clear the air. Yuri, watch out for the "kids"; I very much doubt *this* is Baseline for them. Natsuki, break their tenpins."

"Roger-roger," chirped Sayori as she immediately broke into a run and took a huge leap into the air. She hurled out her grappling hook, caught onto a Nevermore that was almost as big as a dog, and she yanked herself towards it.

Natsuki started screaming hot-bloodedly as she whipped out her hammer, morphed it into a chaingun, and unleashed bullet-hell on the oncoming Grimm, charging towards them as she fired.

Yuri saluted crisply, before going to stand next to not-yet-JNPR. Fortunately, they were busy talking amongst themselves and hadn't caught *why* Yuri was joining them. She placed a hand each on Ren and Nora's heads. "Fear not, precious ones. I shall be your dark protector," she solemnly vowed.

"Neat!" said Nora, "Now let's go *wreck all the things* !"

"Sure…" said Ren.

With that, Yuri, Nora, and Ren ran up to meet the enemy. Nora, of course, was leading the charge with gusto, while Ren was running up just behind her and close to her side, like a shadow. Yuri, despite

seeming to run at a much more sedate pace, kept up with them easily.

As Nora ran, she raised her grenade launcher and started pumping out pipe-bombs that arced through the air, trailing pink smoke, before slamming down into the midst of the Grimm and sending black-and-white gibs flying. Likewise, Ren whipped out his guns and gave the encroaching horde both barrels. Yuri waited until just before Ren and Nora would have entered melee range, and then suddenly blurred forward and began her own assault. She popped out her wristblades and started doing the Human Blender.

Every Grimm within arms' reach of her was swiftly reduced to piles of dissolving chunks of bone-encrusted dark flesh. For a moment, Nora and Ren stopped firing and just stared in awe at her. Far more than her speed, her efficiency was astonishing; not a single movement was wasted, and it seemed as if every single muscle twitch in her body brought about the demise of at least one monster. Then the Grimm started moving around Yuri, and Nora shifted Magnhild to Hammer-Form as she and her lifelong companion were forced into melee action after all.

It wasn't more than an instant before Yuri had cut her way back to their side, and somehow she seemed to always be in position to eviscerate anything that got in Ren or Nora's blindspots. Besides her speed and economy of movement, it seemed her spatial awareness was off the charts as well. Ren silently suspected that the only way a person could *dance* around himself and Nora and through their enemies like that without making a misstep at the speed she was moving…would be if she were seeing everything around her in slow motion.

Up above, Sayori was jumping from one Nevermore to another, dispatching each one with her lightsaber and leaping to the next target even as it fell. At all times, her off-hand sent her grappling hook flying every which way with uncanny accuracy, snaring the flying Grimm and slamming them into each other. Not that anyone could tell by watching her, but as she hopped seemingly at random

from target to target, and as her hook sailed through the air again and again, both were guided by the unseen hand of the Force.

Down below, Natsuki was smashing a path through the Grimm with her own warhammer, which didn't have as much reach as Magnhild but had a somewhat broader head. A faint, pink glow rippled over her body as her Semblance burned through all the candy she had eaten on the way through the forest to give all of her muscles a tremendous boost.

Seeing that her club members were carrying out their assignments with aplomb, Monika took a knee on the grass and raised her gun. To say that Rough Draft was, in its current form, a sniper rifle was a gross understatement of its power. It was more like an anti-materials rifle; a gun with enough penetrating force to deliver death to operators ensconced in heavily armored vehicles. In fact, and Monika was quite proud she had managed this without having to pull anything out of her Pocket, it wouldn't be inaccurate to describe the gun in her hands as a railgun. While the materials had all been acquired from within this loop, the design had been adapted from sniper rifle-type small arms mass accelerators she had handled in the Mass Effect Loop.

In other words, every shot Monika fired from her gun carried enough kinetic energy to punch through an entire column of Grimm, carving a trail of plasma through the air, with nearly every monster the bullet passed through being partially vaporized and blown apart by the impact force. Of course, such firepower would also punch just as easily through any of her friends, or the presently Unawake Loopers. Only Team RWBY, with their billions of loops, had enough Aura to shrug off a hypervelocity slug. Thus, Monika had to take the greatest of care when placing her shots.

Meanwhile, *way* over at the back of the horde, Team RWBY was having their fun. Weiss was more or less literally waltzing through the monsters, with every swing of Myrtenaster released a wave of elemental energy that left nothing but smoking Grimm carcasses in their wake. Blake and Yang appeared to have settled into an

impromptu game of Volley-Grimm with some poor unlucky bastard of an Ursa. Ruby alone refrained from fighting, having instead perched herself on a tree branch and observing how the Literature Club Loopers were going about things. She was a little disappointed that they were all split-up instead of synergizing, but since Monika was directing them she supposed it still counted as teamwork.

Ruby found it particularly interesting that Monika had seen fit to assign one of her girls to essentially babysit a couple of Unawakes. *'Automatically assumes a sense of collateral responsibility,'* Ruby noted, *'Good sign.'* She turned her attention, and her scope, up to Sayori. *'Seems completely focused on what she's doing. Implicit trust in her leader. Weiss said she didn't sense any bad mojo between the girls, or at least no more than would be usual for a group of close friends. Buuut Sayori's also got empathic senses which could mean she's skilled at covering up that kind of thing. She really gives off a 'Crying Clown' vibe, sort of. I should talk to her about stuff sometime.'* Ruby looked to Natsuki next. *'Okay, so she fights like someone who uses violence as an outlet for some serious personal issues. Wonder if Blake's already talked to her about that? Either way, she's obviously into the "cute little ass-kicker" shtick.'* Finally, she looked to Yuri. *'She…* might *be the best fighter in the group. Have to see Monika go melee to be sure. She's pretty darn good, at least. She's already on Baseline-Pyrrha's level, I'm pretty sure.'*

And back on the other side, Jaune Arc and Pyrrha Nikos watched the chaos unfold. "S-so, uh, what do you think we should do?" Jaune asked, "I mean, Weiss mentioned you're a good fighter. Any suggestions?"

"…well, truth be told, combat on *this* scale isn't something I have much experience with," Pyrrha admitted. "Sanctum covered mass-combat theory, of course, but I've never *seen* this many Grimm in one place. Frankly, I'm a bit out of my depth here." Despite what she said, she said it calmly.

"Crap!" yelped Monika, standing up. Her gun came apart in a cloud of glowing green components, some of which flew back into her

pockets, and the rest reassembled in her hands as a pair of handguns. She started running towards the Grimm. "Yuri!" she called as she ran, "Natsuki needs support!"

Yuri broke away from Ren and Nora, and seemed break into a rapid sprint *over top* of the Grimm towards Natsuki, viscous black ichor spray out of the monsters that she dashed across. Consequentially, the Grimm started pressing in on the teenaged duo Yuri had left behind.

Without thinking, Jaune broke into a run towards them. "They need help!" he called back unnecessarily; Pyrrha was on his heels and already overtaking him, having taken off just a second after Jaune had. It wasn't lost on Pyrrha that for her clearly superior reflexes, Jaune had reacted just that little bit faster than she had. She smiled…and then remembered Monika and Sayori's nettling, and scowled.

Monika reached Ren and Nora first, and even before she reached them she opened fire with her pistols. They weren't automatics like StormFlower, but she dropped every Grimm she fired on with one or two headshots, very rarely missing. Once she was in melee, she dropped and slid under the tangle of Grimm Ren and Nora were trying to fend off, sprang back up to her feet and went into a frenzied Gun Kata, occasionally punctuated with flurries of kicks.

Pyrrha got there just a moment after Monika did and started thrusting and swiping at the Grimm with her spear. By the time Jaune caught up, the Grimm had thinned out enough that Monika moved on, and Pyrrha, Ren, and Nora had quickly dispatched what was left. They barely had a moment to catch their breath before the next wave reached them.

Up above, Sayori noticed their predicament as the Grimm surged around them. With a sigh, she jumped off of a Nevermore into the middle of the flock, dropping her weapons into her Pocket for a moment. She drew her arms in and threw them back out with a piercing scream as Sith Lightning *exploded* out of her body, arcing to

the Nevermores closest to her and chaining through the rest of the flock. Within seconds the flock had been annihilated, all but the Giant, and Sayori started falling towards the earth. As she fell, she reactivated her Semblance. For an instant, all the Grimm below froze up before turning their heads skyward, seeming to completely forget about the other teenagers they had been engaged with. The Giant Nevermore abruptly stopped circling and dropped into a nosedive straight for Sayori.

The Grimm turned their backs on the others and started dogpiling each other, trying to get to the girl falling towards them, but the massive devil-bird beat them to it. It aimed to snap at her lower body with its beak, but before it could do so Sayori did an aileron roll to her right and Unpocketed her rope-hook, and threw it to snag the massive Grimm in its throat. She yanked herself onto the Giant Nevermore's neck and positioned herself just behind its head. She screamed as loud as she could, "SORRY FOR CHEATING, MONI!" and grabbed a handful of the Nevermore's flesh. She squeezed hard, and stabbed into the monster's mind with a sort of mental lance. *'You're not a wild monster anymore,'* she thought firmly, in a mental tone of voice that allowed for no talkback. *'You're* my *bird, now. You are my weapon. There is no greater power than the Dark Side, and I am its master. I am* your *Master. I AM YOUR MASTER AND YOU. ARE. MY. DEATH-BIRDY!'*

The Nevermore immediately broke under her will. It slammed down, talons-first, into the Grimm a decent pace away from everyone else. It folded its wings to its sides and stood up at attention. As an afterthought, Sayori added, *'And your name is now Becky. Bob your head twice if you understand me.'*

Becky the Nevermore bobbed its head twice. *'Very good. Now then…'*

"BECKY! LET'S SMASH!" Sayori yelled, whipping out her lightsaber and holding it aloft. Monika, Yuri, and Natsuki all facepalmed at the same time. As did Blake and Weiss, while Yang and Ruby cracked up laughing.

Becky spun around on the spot, its tail knocking down the Grimm that were trying to reach Sayori. Sayori switched off her Semblance, and took a huge flying leap away from her beast. She landed next to Jaune, Pyrrha, Ren and Nora. "Look alive, dearies, we've got work to do!" she said spritely. As she did so, in the background, Becky pecked at the ground three times in quick succession, taking out a large clump of Grimm. Then the Nevermore gave a mighty flap, bowling over a large swath of Grimm.

The four Unawake Loopers stared at her. Nora abruptly squeaked, "Teach me your ways, O Wise One!"

"No time for that now," said Sayori as she bisected a Beowolf, snared the upper-half with her hook and flailed it at an Ursa.

"How did you…" Pyrrha began, but couldn't seem to figure out the right words to phrase the question on her mind.

"It's just a god thing," Sayori said with a shrug.

" *What?* " Nora and Ren asked flatly.

"You guys wanna play Twenty-One Questions, or do you want to slay some monsters?" asked Sayori, who was working on cutting a path to her friends.

"She has a point," said Ren as he high-kicked a Beowolf that had lunged at Nora, dispatching it with a stab to the chest with one of his bladed guns.

Meanwhile, Monika, Yuri, and Natsuki were standing with their backs to each other. Yuri had her blades at the ready, Natsuki was panting as her sugar-rush of power was petering out, Monika had turned Rough Draft into something like a revolver-shotgun, and they were facing off against three Deathstalkers. "Well, if no one else is going to say it, I will," said Monika, "Girls…we appear to have been caught in a pincer maneuver."

"Damn it Monika is now really the time?" Natsuki growled.

"Natsuki's got a point, Monika," Yuri spoke up with an impish grin. "That really *stung* ."

"Fuck off, Goth-Cow!" Natsuki snapped. Then she gave a scream and bullrushed at the nearest scorpionoid Grimm. She tumble-rolled between its pincers before springing up to whack the monster in what could arguably be called its chin. Pouring the last of her enhanced strength into that swing she managed to lift the Grimm up so that its underbelly was exposed. With an almost pained grunt of effort, she flipped her weapon around and opened fire, gutting the beast.

Yuri just ran right up and stabbed her Deathstalker in its ugly face with two blades of Fire Dust. She detached them from her wrists before backflipping away, popping a fresh pair of blades, and launching one of them at one of the blades she'd left embedded in the Deathstalker. The resulting fulmination left a gaping, gory crater where the monsters eyes and mandibles had been, and it collapsed on the spot. Then she ran over to Natsuki's side, just in time to behead a Beowolf sneaking up on the pinkette's six.

Monika loaded her gun with Fire Dust shells and opened fire on the Deathstalker facing her. Fire scoured its many eyes, enraging it, and the monster charged at her. When it thrust a pincer at her, she grabbed it and flipped herself on top of the forelimb, then jumped onto the cephalothorax, deflecting its stinger with a spinning kick in mid-air. She aimed Rough Draft down at the creature, but a sudden gust of wind blew her off of the Deathstalker, and then it got impaled by Becky's beak. The Giant Nevermore lifted its head, the Deathstalker still wriggling on its beak; Becky opened its beak to unleash a deafening battle-crow, tearing the other Grimm in half in the process.

"Sorry for the kill-steal, Mon-Mon," Sayori called a she rode up on a remarkably docile Boarbatusk that was the size of a horse. "Guess Becky was feeling peckish."

"Having fun playing Beast Master?" Monika asked with a grin as she reformed Rough Draft into a light machine gun and jumped up on the Boarbatusk, sitting behind Sayori.

"Mentally, these things are a lot like living nodes of Dark Side energy," Sayori observed. "I don't think they have souls, though, so little-to-nothing in terms of willpower. Just manic hunger for, quite specifically, human and Faunus flesh, and a strong attraction to negative emotions. In fact, I kind of feel cheated; I'm pretty sure I could draw these things to me without having to have a Semblance for it. Anyways, this is Edge-Hog. Edge-Hog, this is my friend Monika." Edge-Hog the Boarbatusk gave no sign of acknowledgement, it just kept rushing through its fellow Grimm while Monika and Sayori destroyed every monster around them.

"Edge-Hog?"

"Yeah, cuz it's an edgy hog monster, and I saw it doing the Sonic thing. The Spin-Dash," Sayori explained.

"Sayori, never let anyone tell you you're not a layered individual," said Monika as she reloaded her gun.

Sayori directed their mount to plow straight towards Yuri and Natsuki. Unfortunately, Natsuki's reflexes got the better of her, and before she noticed that her friends were riding the monster she caved in the side of its head. The abruptly dead Creature of Grimm plowed a short furrow into the ground, throwing Monika and Sayori over their friends. Luckily, Sayori had the presence of mind to kill her lightsaber before she could accidentally maim someone with it.

"Oh. Uh…sorry, Sayo," Natsuki nervously chuckled.

Sayori sighed as she and Monika helped each other up to their feet. "Nah, you're fine. My bad for using enemy monsters like that on the battlefield."

Looking around, the girls found that only a few Grimm were left. Despite clearly pulling their punches very heavily, Team RWBY had taken out a little more than half the horde by themselves. The quartet predestined to become Team JNPR were putting on a good show against a stray Alpha Beowolf. Becky was doing a fair job of mopping up. Only a thin spread of monsters were left in the area around the Literature Club Loopers.

"You wanna take five, Nat?" asked Monika, "You seem a bit winded and there honestly isn't much work left to do here."

"I'll be fine," Natsuki grunted, dropping Chekov's Gun into the sling on her back and somewhat awkwardly cracking the knuckles of her paws. "Think I'll go hand-to-hand for the rest of the fight, though. It's really weird handling that thing without thumbs."

"We should maybe do some reworking as soon as we have access to a forge," Yuri mused, "At least, I should hope a combat school of Beacon's renown would have a high-quality forge."

"Well, I think I've done enough damage for one day," Sayori said, self-satisfied as Becky the Nevermore chicken-walked over to her.

"I feel the same, actually. My shoulders are feeling a bit stiff, if I'm being honest," said Yuri.

"More for us, then~" said Monika as she and Natsuki took off for the nearest monsters.

Sayori walked up to Becky, laid a hand on one of its talons, and with a loud whoosh of displaced air the Giant Nevermore disappeared.

Yuri blinked. "Is that…wise? The Pocketing of living things is somewhat controversial, Sayori."

"I know," said Sayori, stretching her arms above her head. "But the alternatives are putting it down, which seems wasteful, or letting it run rampant again and go back to hunting down people, which would

be worse. Besides, Grimm only get bigger and stronger the longer they live. I'm kind of curious to see how far that goes. Whatever negative consequences may come of me keeping Becky, I'll take them. Goes hand-in-hand with being a Sith, y'know?"

"Fair enough," said Yuri. She gave her friend a smile. "And if anyone gives you too much guff, I'll help you brainstorm revenge pranks."

"Thanks," said Sayori, smiling back at her friend. Then she frowned. "Hey, wanna help me brainstorm something right now?"

"Of course," said Yuri, whipping out a small, low table and her tea set.

"Well, I think I ought to name my Fire Dust baton," said Sayori as they sat down for a drink.

"Your what-now?" asked Yuri.

"How I'm going to explain my lightsaber to non-Loopers," said Sayori. "See, I noticed the rest of you have kind of set up a writing motif with your weapons' names. Rough Draft, Chekov's Gun, and Poetic Justice, right? And I remember Blake mentioning that naming weapons is almost universal on Remnant. So, yeah, my weapons need names. And my grappling rope is obvious: Plot Hook."

"Strong," said Yuri.

"Thank you. But my lightsaber is trickier," Sayori admitted.

"Well…Chekov's Gun is a trope, Rough Draft and Plot Hook are writing terms, and Poetic Justice is a figure of speech," Yuri observed, "So you can use any of those three things to keep with the theme." She took a thoughtful sip. "Maybe something that invokes Tragedies and Comedies?"

Sayori turned her eyes foreheadwards. "Hmm…tragedy, and comedy…" she muttered thoughtfully. Suddenly her eyes lit up and

she snapped her fingers. "Eucatastrophe!"

"I'm a what?" asked Yuri, reeling back in her seat a bit. Then her brow furrowed. "No, wait…eucatastrophe? That's not a word you hear very often these days."

"Yeah, but it's a word that means something good has happened, but it's *almost* a word that means something bad has happened. And when you think about it, a catastrophe for one person is a eucatastrophe for their mortal enemies!"

Yuri blinked. "Sayori? Never let anyone tell you you're not a deep-thinking individual."

"Welp, all the Grimm are dead," said Ruby as she strolled up to the pair. "You girls ready for our Sorting Ceremony?"

"Sure!" said Sayori, jumping up to her feet. Then she ran over towards Monika and Natsuki, yelling, "Hey guys, Yuri helped me figure out a name for my weapon…"

Part 12

"Russell Thrush. Cardin Winchester. Dove Bronzewing. Sky Lark." The headmaster looked over the assembled boys. "The four of you retrieved the black bishop pieces. From this day forward, you will work together as Team CRDL, led by... Cardin Winchester!"

"Hooray team NPC," Yuri deadpanned. "Seriously, do these people become important later or-?"

"Nope, that basically sums them up," Yang agreed, clapping along with the crowd. "Racist bullies who spend a bit of time drowning Jaune in toxic masculinity through blackmail and then exist to get pummeled for training."

"Jaune Arc. Lie Ren. Pyrrha Nikos. Nora Valkyrie." Ozpin turned to the next crew. "The four of you retrieved the white rook pieces. From

this day forward, you will work together as Team JNPR."

Nora shouted in glee and almost- *almost* -gave Ren a hug, but caught sight of the four Dokis smirking at her and transformed it into a friendly shoulder punch instead.

"WUSS!" Natsuki cried brightly.

"Lead by... Jaune Arc!"

"Huh?" Jaune blinked. "L-Led by-?"

Ozpin smiled cheerfully. "Congratulations, young man."

Pyrrha shoulder-bumped the young man, gasping when she accidentally knocked him to the ground. "Oh my, I'm sorry!"

"ALSO WUSS!" Natsuki declared cheerfully.

Ozpin gave her a look as the next team stepped onto the stage. "Blake Belladonna. Ruby Rose. Weiss Schnee. Yang Xiao Long. The four of you retrieved the white knight pieces. From this day forward, you will work together as Team RWBY."

A sly expression flitted across Blake's face. In one quick movement, she swept a leg out from under the blonde girl, caught her mid-fall, and planted a deep kiss on her surprised but entirely willing lips.

"NOT A WUSS!" Natsuki proclaimed gleefully.

"Definitely not," Sayori agreed, grinning.

"Place your bets!" Ruby shouted to the startled crowd, whipping out her scroll. "Ten seconds, twenty, how long will they be lip-locked?"

"Forty-five," Weiss offered casually.

"We got forty-five from the rich girl, anybody else wanna-?"

"FULL MINUTE!" Sayori shouted. "A FULL MINUTE!"

"Full minute, full minute from peach-hair, clock's already at twenty-five anyone wanna go, winner gets fifty lien from every better!"

A series of hands raised from the crowd, accompanied by eager shouts. Glynda stepped forward, but Ozpin held up a hand.

"That's a minute thirty, thirty minutes, a hundred seconds exact, OH sorry passed the thirty second mark, forty seconds, anybody want to risk forty seconds, TOO BAD we're at forty-five, sorry Weiss it's all downhill from here, we're at fifty seconds everyone, any more bets, anybody, anyone, fifty-five, you in the back, two minutes-!"

Blake and Yang finally broke apart with a gasp.

"SIXTY SECONDS EXACTLY! Peach-hair wins! All betters meet with me before the night is out, I'm Ruby Rose, leader of team RWBY-"

"I never said you were the team leader," Ozpin pointed out with an amused tone.

"I know, I read your cue card."

"I'm not holding a cue card."

Ruby cheerfully produced a small slip of paper. "That's because I stole it." She grinned mischievously at the laughter of the crowd.

"...Hmm. Well, as it so happens, I *did* choose you to be the team leader, but given your actions I might reconsider."

"You change your decision and I revolt," Weiss said, idly filing her nails.

"Same," Blake added, standing up and refluffing her hair.

"Yang makes three!" Yang finished with a smirk.

"Very well. Team RWBY, led by Ruby Rose, as given through popular appointment." Ozpin playfully narrowed his eyes. "Now get off my stage, you miscreants."

The four girls stepped off, waving happily at the cheering and whooping crowd. Ozpin held up his hands for quiet, before turning to the last group. "And finally... Monika Musil. Sayori Shimizu. Yuri Yamashita. Natsuki Nakajima. The four of you retrieved the black pawn pieces. From this day forward, you will work together as team MYNS-"

"I'm sorry, but I feel I must correct you."

The crowd murmured as Monika strode forward, taking the microphone from Ozpin.

"I know this is a little unconventional, but... the four of us came from the same village, and we all survived its destruction at the hands of the Grimm. We've become... quite close in our journey, close enough that we are almost-no, that we are a family. For that reason, I feel the need to make an announcement." She took a breath. "We will keep our old names, for the sake of paperwork, but... in respect to our home, and what it meant for us coming together, I would like to formally declare that from now on, team Mints is comprised of Monika, Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki Shiori."

She bit her lip, looking over at the girls. "If... that's alright, that is."

"...Honestly..." Natsuki smiled. "Yeah. That's fine."

"I was expecting something like this a lot sooner," Yuri admitted.

"Oh my gosh!" Sayori pounced on Monika and, somehow, immediately shoved her into a hugpile with the other two. "THIS IS ONE OF THE HAPPIEST MOMENTS OF MY LIFE!"

Ozpin's smile, slowly, came back to his face. "...Very well. From this day forward, you will work together as team MYNS, led by... Monika

Shiori." He glanced at Glynda. "It seems like we're going to have an interesting year..."

Chapter 17

17.1 – The Great Debate, by Masterweaver.

"Shower or bath."

It had seemed like a fun idea, at the time.

"...Come again?"

After all, Monika had been on the debate club at one point, or at least had that memory written into her code.

"Pretty sure I was clear, Sayori. Which is superior, a shower or a bath?"

So, it was reasoned, the occasional game of 'get together and have actual debates over ridiculous subjects' would be great.

"Erm. Yuri, do you really... do you really want to have this conversation?"

And it was only fair for them to alternate who got to choose the subject...

Natsuki snickered. "Actually, you know what, fun conversation. I take team bath."

"I suppose I'll be team shower then," Monika allowed reluctantly.

"I'm... honestly on the fence," Yuri admitted. "It depends on the size of the bath."

"Oh yeah, obviously," Natsuki agreed. "Sayori, you're moderating?"

"Uh..." Sayori glanced around the table. "I... sure, whatever. I don't actually care that much, either way..."

"Okay." Natsuki turned to Monika. "So, let's assume for sake of argument we are dealing with a bath at least large enough to entirely submerge yourself and at least wide enough to do a shoulder t-pose lying down."

Monika blinked. "Shoulder t-pose?"

"Like a t-pose, but you're grabbing your shoulders. So... elbows out width."

"That's three times as wide as the person in question," Monika pointed out. "Most tubs are only one and a half times as wide."

"Those are sitting tubs, designed to also be showers. A compromise that weakens both options." Natsuki shook her head. "No, if we're going to have this argument, the shower stall needs to be large enough to stuff four people in, and the tub of a good enough size to cuddle with somebody else comfortably."

Yuri cleared her throat. "I'd like to interject here and point out that while I am the self-designated pervert, I was not asking the question from the stance of sexual utilization. Or at least, not solely from that stance, as the purposes of de-stressing, waking up, and of course actually getting oneself clean are also factors in overall superiority."

"Point sustained," Sayori said. "However, Natsuki's points on minimal size are also decent. We shall proceed with this debate assuming the tub is at minimum two and a half times as wide as the user and deep enough to submerge the user, and the shower can uncomfortably contain four people of the user's size."

Monika considered for a moment, and then nodded. "Alright, I think that's fair. So... from what I understand, we're talking about the superiority of showers versus baths by the metrics of cleaning oneself physically, therapeutic utilization of water for relaxation, and as a location for sexual intercourse?"

Sayori mused for a moment. "...At the moment, yes. Would you like to make an opening statement?"

17.2 – Fever Dream, by Masterweaver.

Sayori poked her club president. "...Monika? Is something wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, no. I just had a weird dream." Monika frowned. "At least... at least I think it was a dream. I'm eighty-five percent certain it was a dream. It could have been a weird loop I woke up very late in."

"Really?"

"You know that Shadow of the Colossus game?"

"I've played it. It really resonated with me. Honestly, all the Team Ico stuff does."

"Well... picture that, but I was the main character and Hiroaka was the damsel. And you were the horse, and the mask people were all Natsuki, and instead of lizards with silver tails there were a bunch of Yuris." Monika frowned. "And I think I had to eat their hair?"

"Huh. And what about the colossi?"

"...I want to say 'mashups of various Pokémon.' I'm not... completely sure, though. It was kind of... it was a very strange dream."

Sayori nodded. "Well, I can think of two possible explanations."

"Yeah?"

"Either this is a deeply metaphorical representation of your feelings about our baseline... or you need to stop eating chocolate-covered burritos before bed."

Monika winced. "But, but, they-they're just so tasty!"

17.3 – Friction.

Once again, it was Day 3, and once again, Monika was late to the club. ' *This is some real stupid-ass annoying bullshit, lemmetellya,* ' thought Monika.

Then she heard the explosion.

Then Sayori came bursting out of the clubroom, slamming the door shut behind her. Then she ducked just in time to avoid the Trigun omnibus that came crashing through the door's window.

"…Natsuki and Yuri?" Monika asked dourly.

"Natsuki and Yuri," Sayori sighed in reply, a large blue sweatdrop pixelizing into being on the side of her head to show how exasperated she was.

"You're getting better and better at that everyloop, Veeps," Monika said genuinely.

" *YOU TAKE THAT BACK, YOU FAT-CHESTED VORE-FETISH COW!* " Natsuki's voice screamed shrilly from inside the room.

" *MAKE ME, YOU JUVENILE HAMSTER-FACED CAKE-JUNKIE!* " Yuri's voice retorted. After a considerable pause, she added, " *A-and I do NOT have a v-v-vore fetish!* "

Then something crashed and the whole building seemed to shake.

"So…dare I ask?" Monika asked.

"Shipping dispute," Sayori replied, scooting away from the door before standing up next to Monika, dusting off her skirt.

"…as in their plans for shipping us, or…?"

"Nah, they were talking about that *Ninjas of Love* series that Blake gave us, and it turns out their respective OTPs are so diuretically–"

"Diametrically," Monika corrected automatically.

"–opposed on every possible level that they discovered that their philosophies regarding shipping are so irretrievably–"

"Irreconcilably?"

"–different that they had to get into this huge debate to convince each other that their way makes more sense."

"And inevitably words ceased to suffice and the gratuitous violence commenced," Monika surmised.

As if on cue, Yuri screamed, " *YOU WILL RUE THE DAY YOU OFFENDED MY GOTHIC-ROMANCE SENSIBILITIES YOU EMOTIONALLY BRAINDEAD GERBIL!* "

" *EAT MY TSUNDERE ASS, YOU METAPHORICAL KNIFE-SWALLOWING PEN-OPHILE!* " they heard Natsuki retort.

"…damn, that's a solid callback-burn," Monika muttered.

"…how long has it been since their last…y'know, big-blow-out fight?" Sayori asked.

Monika blinked. "16,428 loops," she replied. "Which is a new record for them. They *are* improving."

"Can you load the Holodeck with that Mall of America simulation?" Sayori asked.

"Sure thing. We should give them some space," Monika readily agreed.

…

Le next day:

After a day of window-shopping followed by a night of watching their favorite off-Broadway musicals at a simulation of Radio City Hall, Monika and Sayori returned to the clubroom with no small amount of

trepidation. No one was screaming, nothing was shaking, and there was no indication of explosions. Was all well and good once again… or were they merely entering the eye of the storm?

As they entered the room, they heard Natsuki saying, "–and then Kyoko whips out a *potato launcher* and tells the blonde woman, 'we can do this the fun way, or you can grab that pepper shaker and take the easy way out. What'll it be, missy?' And I'm just standing there next to the bald kid like 'what even is today?', y'know?"

Yuri giggled. She had a black eye, and Natsuki appeared to be sporting a couple bald spots today.

Monika and Sayori just stood there, outside the doorway, staring at the pair chattering away about nothing in particular. Slowly, they turned their heads to share a glance. "…these two are *way* weirder as friends than they are as individuals," Monika observed in a low voice.

"The sheer irrationality required for two so disparate personalities to have any kind of benign relationship at all, let alone the great friendship they usually display, is more than enough to register even on Master Pinkie's weird-shit-o-meter," Sayori muttered back, "So I concur."

17.4 – The Great Debate, Continued, by Masterweaver.

(17.1 cont.)

"I would first like to examine the utilization of showers and baths for their presumably original intended purpose, that is, the cleaning of oneself."

"Also known as bathing," Natsuki pointed out.

"A linguistic holdover from the era before the shower," Monika countered. "Which, in this regard at least, is the clear superior."

Natsuki's hand slammed against the table. "I beg to differ!"

Monika quirked a brow. "The shower provides a constant stream of water to wash away the grime and accumulated dirt off the skin and hair. The bath, meanwhile, allows said filth to remain in the presence of the body until point of body's removal. Constant and efficient scrubbing of the skin-"

"Is less effective than an intense soak," Natsuki interjected. "Cleaning away the surface will do for a day or two, but with submersion the soap digs into the pores and the depths of the scalp. A good bath can leave one twice, if not four times, as clean as a shower. Spas across the world agree."

"I object! Spas have trained staff and specialized jet tubs, we are presuming the superiority of showers and bath in a basic sense!"

"Objections sustained." Sayori gave Natsuki a look. "Rephrase or drop the point."

"Hmm." Natsuki rubbed her chin. "Okay, so while I agree that spas have specialized baths, they do start with the basic bath in abstract for a reason. That reason being my *original* point, that soaking can draw out more oils and grime then merely wetting the surface of the skin."

Monika frowned. "While this might well be true, I have to point out that... hrm." She considered for a moment. "I was going to say something about long hair, but I honestly don't know how hair is washed in a bath."

"To be fair, hair is comprised of dead cells," Natsuki admitted. "So, at least from a standpoint concerned purly with cleanliness, there is no real difference between a bath and a shower."

"But the tangles-yes, the tangles," Monika recovered quickly. "In a shower, gravity tugs wet hair universally down, while in a bath the

aquatic environment would lead to massive interference and, well, intertangling."

"Hmmmm." Yuri tapped her chin. "You know if that were the case, we should be getting a lot of tangles from going to swimming pools."

"Technically what we have are simulations of hair," Natsuki pointed out. "I... reeeeeeally hate to point it out, but even your dead corpse didn't really have that many tangles... we're not exactly good standards by which to judge the tangling of hair after a soak."

"Point sustained," Monika quipped.

"Hey!" Sayori cried. "That's my job!"

"I'm just saying, as the general program manager, long hair for us does not present the same issues long hair would present in real life."

"I will concede that soaking long hair could lead to a knotty situation," Natsuki said. "But only if care is not taken to disentangle while the hair is still wet which, assuming the hair is being run through with shampoo and fingers, is an unlikely event."

"Hmm." Sayori glanced from her to Monika. "Do you have anything to add to this assessment?"

"...At the moment, I do not."

"Then I believe we can safely say a bath is superior to a shower for the purpose of cleaning oneself."

Monika sighed. "Alright... moving on then."

17.5 – Marketing Monika, by Masterweaver.

"After a long day of hard schoolwork, tense teachers, and tight deadlines, every schoolgirl just wants to come home and indulge in some relaxation."

Monika's silky voice flowed smoothly out of the speakers as, on screen, she entered a softly lit apartment, her schoolbag sliiiiiiiiiding down her arms and slowly falling from her fingertips.

"A refreshing glass of tea is just the thing to ease her worries."

She sunk into a thickly padded chair with a gentle hum, reaching out to a nearby endtable where, inexplicably, a kettle and an already poured glass of tea was waiting. Her fingers wrapped slowly, individually, around the glass, and she brought it to her lips for a long, deep sip.

"Softleaf tea. Ease into bliss."

The glass was pulled from her face, and she gazed skyward with a sigh so content her back arced for five whole seconds.

Then the scene froze, leaving the Literature Club to stare at the smartphone with mixed expressions.

Sayori nodded thoughtfully. "Huh. Well, I'm questioning my sexuality now."

Natsuki hrmfed. "Yeah, so anyway I was browsing the net and this came up as an ad. Which begs the question... Monika, what did we just watch?"

"A tea commercial."

"Correction: We watched the world's most sensual tea commercial with you as the star player! Seriously, *what?!"*

Monika sighed. "Look, we need money to pay for the server we're on, alright? I signed a contract with a studio, filmed a few scenes-"

Sayori blinked. "I thought you could just hack rich people's accounts."

"They are surprisingly well guarded this loop. Don't know what's up with that. This seemed like a decent alternative."

"Uh-huh," Natsuki deadpanned, "and what was with the borderline seductive narration and acting?"

Monika shrugged. "Sex sells, even if it's implicit."

"Can confirm," Yuri agreed, "looks can get attention. Quality is needed to keep it, though."

"Well, I'm not in charge of making the tea, but their sales seem to be doing okay."

Natsuki pinched her brow. "Could you, maybe, have told us you were doing this?"

"I didn't want to worry you girls! I mean, it's just a way to pay rent, that's it."

"First of all, that is stupid we deserve to know what problems we're facing. Secondly, why didn't you think of inviting us to star in these things?"

Monika opened her mouth, paused, and facepalmed. "That is an excellent question."

"Hmm." Yuri frowned. "I am a bit camera shy, but... I guess I could help out with set design or something."

Sayori jumped up. "Ooo! I can do special effects!"

"And I guess I'll be the kid-appeal character for juiceboxes or whatever." Natsuki groaned. "Damn my malnourished midget body."

"Hey... that's not a bad idea," Yuri mused. "Spunky kid for spunky shoe commercials, you can do crazy parkour stunts with them..."

17.6 – Watch Out For Sith, by Black Omochao.

(DDLC)/(Yo-Kai Watch)

Sayori Awoke to find herself in a small, one-room building, sitting on a chair with a desk and laptop before her, she glanced around, noting the room was lightly furnished with things such as shelves that housed models and manga, as well as two couches in the center of the room, with some sort of small creature in a yellow rabbit-themed spacesuit sitting on one.

"Um… wait, what was that last thing?" Sayori questioned, quickly going through her memories and letting out a Ping. She got about three back and noted the small creature–yo-kai–had taken notice of her.

"Oh, you Awake? Dani," the being Sayori's memories told her was named 'USApyon' spoke curiously. "Darth Somnus, I presume? Pleasure to finally meet you, dani."

Sayori stared at the strange creature sitting before her in surprise, but more so by what it had referred to her as, rather than its appearance. "You… know of me?"

"I had heard of you from Cognita. It's nice talking to another Sith every now and then, even if I'm not a member of your group 'Looping Sith Ladies,' dani" the yo-kai explained with a shrug.

Sayori nodded in understanding, "Cognita… right… Cinder. I'm sorry, but… can we drop the titles for the rest of this conversation? Please?"

USApyon shrugged, "Makes no difference to me. Either I'm 'Darth USApyon,' or just plain USApyon. So, I'll call you Sayori, that what you want? Dani."

"Yes, thank you," the currently human girl bowed in thanks.

"Well you're certainly more respectful than my usual partner, though probably won't be long before I miss her annoying me, dani,"

USApyon shook his head with a sigh.

"Oh… sorry about that, taking your friend's place that is…" Sayori looked away a bit guiltily.

"Meh, I could use a break from her anyway," USApyon dismissed. "Not like you could have any say in where you Loop to anyway. Don't go beating yourself up over things that aren't your fault, okay? Dani."

"Yeah, that's true," the visiting Looper admitted with a nod, glancing toward the local curiously. "So… 'dani?'"

"It's a verbal-tick, dani," USApyon answered plainly.

"Right, okay…" Sayori nodded in understanding. "And also, 'Darth USApyon'… is that really your Sith name?"

"Yes. Dani."

A silence settled between the two Sith Loopers for a brief moment.

Sayori let out a cough, briefly going over the rest of her Loop-memories before speaking again. "So… we're like, yo-kai detectives?"

"Yup! We solve cases involving yo-kai, for yo-kai, or otherwise. Though usually it's not all that interesting since Inaho and I have already solved all the Baseline cases for the time being. But there is still variants and all the Loop variable time we potentially have," the otter yo-kai explained confidently. "Plus, with Looper abilities and knowhow we can typically expand our business to a lot more than what we were capable of in Baseline," USApyon paused as he glanced at Sayori again, "Though… since you're a visitor, we should probably keep things simple… dani."

"Well… being a detective could be interesting," the often-digital girl said thoughtfully. "Monika mentioned she visited this Loop before, though she became a yo-kai…"

"Monika, oh, she's here too," the local Looper pointed out.

Sayori's eyes widened with a bit of surprise, "She is?"

"She's replacing Fumika, other than Keita, she's the only other Awake Looper currently," USApyon pulled out a yo-kai pad and began swiping on it. "She said to contact her if you Woke up, she'll probably want to speak with you, make sure you're doing okay and everything. Dani."

"Yeah, that sounds like her," Sayori chuckled a bit.

"She wants us to meet at Keita's house. We can discuss how to handle the rest of the Loop from there," USApyon nodded, moving towards the door.

"It'll also be a chance to meet your Anchor, Monika talked about him once and mentioned we'd probably get along," Sayori smiled as she got up from her seat and followed the local Looper.

17.7 – The Great Debate, Expanded, by Masterweaver.

(17.1 cont.)

"In regards to utilization for the purposes of nonsexual physical relaxation, the shower provides consistent tactile impact through the stream of water at temperatures determined, hopefully, by the user of the shower, with some variation of pressure depending on the showerhead. This can be directed to various parts of the body as decided by the bather at different times." Monika clasped her hands together. "The bath, I think you'll find, only provides tactile sensation upon initial submersion."

"While I can see your point, I have to point out that tactile sensation is not the only benefit of a bathtub." Natsuki put a small sphere on the table. "Behold: The bath bomb. A collection of soaps, scents, and sparkles designed to emerge upon submersion in water, as seen in baths."

"And it is possible to put scented candles in showers-yes, it is, I've seen advertisements. And special soaps to scrub and foam on one's skin. The question of enhancements is, I think, irrelevant to the discussion; if we allowed it, we would both be bringing up increasingly esoteric soaps and shampoos which is, I believe, not the point of the debate."

"Hmmm." Sayori rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "I understand your argument, yet it can also be argued that the bath bomb and related ideas are exclusive to the bath. Can you think of a unique aspect of a shower that a bath does not have?"

"Flexible showerheads, for... intimate purposes."

"I object to that!" Natsuki stated. "At the moment we are describing whether showers or baths are more relaxing, not which is better for sex!"

"Does it qualify as sex if there is only one participant? But... yes, it is a gray area," Monika conceded. "However, the ability to aim the stream of water anywhere on the body is something that the bath does not have."

"...Point sustained. Baths can utilize bath bombs, and showers can utilize flexible showerheads." Sayori folded her hands. "However, given the variety of both such objects, I must insist that we do not bring in super-expensive ultrarare oh-my-god-you-have-to-try-this-you'll-die-it's-so-wonderful examples of either, simply accept that it is possible."

"Very well. Still, this only reinforces my original point," Monika affirmed. "The bath's relaxation is sustained, but diffused. The relaxation a shower affords can be actively directed to the most needy portions of the body, either through rotation of said body or directed use of a flexible shower head."

"So one has to actively participate in their relaxation," Natsuki pointed out. "Doesn't this defeat the purpose?"

"Not necessarily. We are aiming, I presume, for the end result of feeling refreshed. The bath and bath bomb may provide that, if the initial factors are calibrated properly, but once started it cannot be altered. The shower is controlled at all times, so momentary discomfort can be altered on the fly to create an overall better experience."

"Mmm..." Natsuki poned her mouth, paused, and frowned. "...Yeah, okay, fine... I guess you win this one."

"Oh." Monika coughed. "Well, this is awkward."

"Why?"

Yuri chuckled. "Don't you realize, Natsuki? If Bath won one point, and Shower won one point, then in the end it boils down..."

"...to which one is better for sex." Natsuki groaned. "Well, this will be *fun..."*

17.8 – Fashion Statement, by Masterweaver.

"Well I've heard of stiletto heels, but this... this is something else."

"Oh, hello Natsuki. Yes, My last loop was quite interesting."

"Really? Interesting enough to strap kitchen knives to your shoes?"

"I, ah, may have taken up an apprentice position. Informal, but after explaining my story to her Bayonetta decided to teach me a few tricks."

"...Bayonetta."

"Yes, Bayonetta."

"The eight-foot-tall angel-slaying sexually intimidating witch with spandex made from her own hair and high-heel pistols who makes Kill La Kill look childsafe."

"Your artistic description is quite well constructed. But she's slain demons as well."

"...You know, Yuri, my first instinct is to say what the actual frig-frag is going through your head, but the more I think about it the more it makes sense."

"Well, I already have the hair for it, after all..."

17.9 – Key Issues, by Masterweaver.

"Soooooooooo." Monika cleared her throat. "Let me see... let me see if I understand, entirely, what is going on here."

She ticked off her hands. "Hiroaka was, apparently, one of the Keyblade wielders that Ansem-"

"Xemnas," Sayori corrected quickly.

"No, it's Xenahort," Yuri pointed out.

"Whatever! The big bad guy got ahold of Hiroaka and..." Monika winced a little. "Spiritually vivisected him, I think."

"But not before putting him to sleep first," Natsuki said. "Which is where I came from."

"Yes, you're the Dream Eater that, somehow, he raised to sapience. I... don't know if that's possible in Kingdom Hearts baseline but, I guess, whatever. So, anyway, Xenahort started by trying to split apart the light and darkness of Hiroaka's heart, and that caused a huge explosion of emotion monsters...?"

"Unversed," Yuri supplied. "I was one of the last."

"Right, I remember that, I'm coming to it. Anyway, so in the process, he somehow drained the light from Hiroaka, but because Hiroaka's sleeping heart was being held on by Natsuki, his waking... heart,

which is somehow different, became the world's friendliest Heartless."

"Personally," Sayori mused, "I kind of feel weird being a literal depression monster."

"Anyway, then the rest of the light formed into an Unversed made out of his... curiosity, I think, and that's Yuri, and then his soul, which is apparently just the animating force of the body, took over his body and became a Nobody, which is me, and by the way Kingdom Hearts terminology is really weird."

"You know, they mistranslated Aura as Scent in the English translation of Chain of Memories?" Natsuki shrugged. "I mean, I heard about it online-"

"Whatever. So, as a Nobody, Ans-Xem-ugh, the bald evil guy had me make a replica of Hiroaka and transfer his memories into the replica, so the Hiroaka that thinks he's Hiroaka is actually a replica, and that also had the side effect of bringing Natsuki into the waking world, and somehow we're all still independent and able to function despite somehow all technically being the same guy. Except Natsuki who is just a dream ghost... thing."

Yuri nodded. "Yes, that about sums it up. Except for the part where I eat the other Unversed, but that's kind of irrelevant."

"You know what confuses me?" Sayori put her hand on her hip. "Hiroaka is a boy. We're all girls. I don't think he was transgender this loop-"

Natsuki held up a hand. "I think that's my fault. The dream world has a kind of fluid interpretation of gender when it does at all, so I might have confused him for a her and that affected all of your formations... I'm just spitballing here."

Monika pinched her brow. "Whatever. So, we're four parts of one person that by the metaphysics of this reality shouldn't exist, and

we've woken up early enough that Sora and crew are probably not Awake, and... uh... Disney stuff, I guess. I don't know, the lore is really confusing." She sighed. "So... anyway, what do we do now?"

There was some consideration.

"...practice using a Keyblade?" Sayori suggested.

"But if we're fragments of the same person, we should only be able to use one Keyblade between all of us," Yuri pointed out.

"And I'm technically separate from this whole mess," Natsuki added. "So I don't get the giant magic key."

Monika groaned. "This is going to be a long loop."

17.10 – Playing Each Other, Part 2, by Black Omochao.

(12.3 cont.)

(DDLC)/(Seaman)

Seaman narrowed his eyes at the colorful title screen that had appeared on the monitor, though he remembered the warning he saw when he started the game up. "… Some sort of subversive-game? Probably going to start all cutesy and turn to horror half-way through?" fish-man rolled his eyes.

…

Monika twitched slightly, looking around, particularly in Hiroaka's direction. The Anchor looked towards her friends, just as a fish tank loaded up on the game screen.

"Okay, here we go, I can tell this is going to be a good time!" Sayori smiled enthusiastically, keeping hold of the controller.

"Sayori, have you ever *played* a pet-sim?" Natsuki questioned cynically.

"Guys," Monika spoke quietly, before the vice-president could answer. "Player's here," she subtly gestured towards the blank-faced MC.

"But we were just getting started," Sayori groaned, "Look, there's already some little fish people in the tank, one of them's using a computer!"

"That is so *weird* ," Natsuki winced at the bizarre creatures swimming around in the tank.

"Guys, we should greet the player, at least. The game can wait," Yuri reasoned with a small smile.

"I don't care either way," Natsuki deadpanned as she turned towards Yuri.

Sayori kept her eyes on the game screen. "I want to at least try greeting the little guys with this microphone-thing, the player doesn't start here so thing's are already derailed. How about you guys greet them, while I play a little longer?" before a response could be given, Sayori cleared her through and spoke into the microphone, "Hello!"

…

"Hm…?" Seaman blinked, glancing away from the computer screen when he heard the foggy sound of the caretaker's voice. He looked back at the screen, nothing seemed to have happened yet.

There was a classroom, and those four girls from the title screen sitting around, with one of them focused on a game console, by the looks of it, none had attempted to interact with his character yet. With a shrug of his fins, he paused the game and began swimming towards the front of the tank.

The caretaker wasn't usually too good with conversation, but it was worth attempting some interaction.

…

"Hm? The player just paused," Monika stated in surprise.

Natsuki looked at the club president skeptically, "Already? We haven't even interacted with them yet! Did they need to use the bathroom!?"

…

"So, what do you want?" Seaman asked as he came up to the murky wall of the tank, his other selves swimming around and babbling.

…

Sayori paused, trying to think of something to say to the human-faced fish creature.

"Seriously? Why are you so focused on this creepy game?" Natsuki sighed. "We still need to think of what to say to the player once they get back!"

Sayori blinked, looking towards her pink-haired friend, before smiling, "Oh, that's a great idea!" Sayori looked back towards the screen eagerly, pressing the button to speak into the microphone, "Do you have a name?"

…

Seaman let out an annoyed sigh at the caretaker's question, "Yes, it's Seaman, obviously."

…

"Rude little gremlin isn't it?" Natsuki grumbled with crossed arms.

"Says the girl who wants to ignore the game," Yuri spoke quietly, she noticed her shorter friend's eyes dart towards her dangerously, she smirked at her.

"Hmm, they're still not back yet," Monika pointed out, patting the inactive Hiroaka on the shoulder.

Sayori nodded to her friends, but also hummed a bit to herself as she tried to think of something else to say to the odd fish-creature on the monitor.

…

Seaman stared at the front wall of the tank for a few more seconds, slowly growing annoyed with the lack of further comment from the caretaker. "… Look, if you come up with something interesting to talk about, I'll be here. But for now, I bid you a good-bye!" and with a huff, the Looping fish-man swam back towards the small computer. ' *Whatever this game entails has to be more entertaining than talking to the caretaker, at least.* '

…

"Oh, he's going back to the little computer," Sayori pointed out, sounding both curious and a bit disappointed at the same time.

"Good! Now maybe you can tear yourself away from disgusting game for a little bit," Natsuki grumbled to herself, before noticing Sayori sending her a look that showed she *clearly* heard her. "… I'm sorry."

"It's fine, but I'm not sure if it's a good idea to leave the Seaman alone at this crucial early stage of development," the vice-president of the literature club insisted, a maternal smile on her face.

Natsuki gave her friend a deadpan look. "… It's a video game, Sayori."

Yuri blinked, looking towards Natsuki, before glancing around the room. "… Not a very convincing point."

"Guys, the player's back!" Monika suddenly exclaimed, bringing the other threes' attention to her. The Anchor let out a cough, before moving back over to the MC and putting on a friendly smile.

"… Can you at least move yourself away from the game long enough to introduce yourself to the player?" the shortest doki asked pointedly.

Yuri chuckled as Sayori let out a childish sigh. "Don't worry, we'll tell them you're a gaming addict and you won't get bothered that much."

"Gaming addict?" the pinkish-orange-haired girl blinked, giving her friend a displeased look. "I haven't even been playing that long…"

"Hello there, I'm Monika. As president of the literature club, it is with great pleasure that I welcome our newest member, um…" Monika gained an odd expression as she read the data that told her the imputed player name. "Seaman…?"

…

Seaman curiously kept his eyes on the computer screen. "Interesting. Usually games like this don't react to strange sounding names…" Seaman used his antenna to scratch his nose. "Unless it's just always like that, for story reasons or whatever. Oh well, I'll see where this game takes me, at the least it will waste a few hours."

17.11 – The Great Debate, Concluded, by Masterweaver.

(17.1 cont.)

"Well... um." Monika cleared her throat. "Well... let's... just assume two participants for this, mutually consenting, and... safe sane and consensual. Obviously."

"Obviously," Natsuki agreed. "No drowning your partner."

"So. Well." Monika gripped at the air. "So... I think... degree of motion. Yes, showers provide more... space, for the... limbs, when

they move. And the body if... up. Down. That thing."

"Well, um... baths... the water supports," Natsuki managed. "So, you know, you can feel... all around the, um. Since they're floating-"

"If they're floating, then, uh, the girl is under the water, right?"

"No. See, she..." Natsuki bent her elbow. "She's sitting, right? Half-sitting. And the... other one, I mean, I'm kind of picturing two girls but it could be two guys... trail up, kisses and..."

"Yes, lips, that... but gripping with, if they're standing, shower..."

"Legs. Legs can, you know, straddle in a horizontal..."

The two of them were slowly turning the color of each other's hair. Yuri hid her growing grin behind a hand. Sayori tried, she tried to keep herself from laughing... but a single giggle escaped her lips.

Natsuki's face went completely red. "No, you know what? This is a stupid debate, let's call it."

"Aw come on!" Sayori whined with grin. "You were doing so well!"

Monika's hands clamped over her face. "Please, no, let's drop it, I agree with Natsuki."

"But I still don't know which one is better!" Yuri complained, no longer bothering to hide her smirk.

Natsuki slammed her hand down. "You know what? Let's just say a river is better."

"Yes," Monika agreed. "The soaking of a tub and the tactile sensation of a shower."

"Plus you get to spend time outside. Gotta love that sun!"

"And if you're lucky you can catch a passing fish as a snack!"

"Ye-wait, hold on, you can't eat fish unprepared!"

"You can if you're Bowser!"

"What?!" Natsuki threw up her hands. "What does that mean?!"

"It... means exactly what I said," Monika rallied, crossing her arms. "Bowser can eat live fish."

"Why Bowser, why did your mind specifically go to Bowser of all things?"

"I... uh... okay, fine, so I was Bowser for my last loop, it was very strange, it just popped into my head-"

Sayori leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand. "Were you a sexy Bowser?"

"WHa-NO! I mean, maybe! I mean-seriously, no, I was just a Bowser that, that was a girl, that's it, I swear."

Natsuki scoffed. "Come on, Sayori, who ever heard of a sexy Bowser?"

"The internet is a wide and varied place," Yuri mused. "I'm sure if we did a google search-"

Monika groaned. "Sweet Yggdrasil, Yuri, why?! Why are you like this?"

"Look, I'm sure that whatever sexy Bowsers are out there are just all weird rule 34 furry stuff," Natsuki said. "If sexy Bowser ever actually becomes a thing like a big thing, I will... I don't know, I'll make one of those really crappy Sonic OCs and have Monika program up a body that I'll prance around in for a loop."

"Yes. I will too. If there ever is a sexy Bowser meme, we'll be the world's cheapest furries for a loop, alright?!"

"I don't mind the furry fandom," Sayori pointed out.

"They're pretty good people, aside from the extremists," Yuri agreed. "Then again, that's universal."

"I mean-no, I-" Monika threw up her hands. "WHAT EVEN IS THIS CONVERSATION?!"

"It's one that is going to end now," Natsuki said.

"Yes. Yes it is. This conversation is just completely nonsensical. Let's all agree that it never, ever happened, and that it's never going to affect us, because we're not going to argue about showers and baths."

"It's a matter of personal preference. That's it. We're done. Story over. Nothing more to see here."

Yuri and Sayori were, at this point, laughing openly.

"...Why." Natuski sighed. "Why do we even bother trying to pretend we're sane."

"I don't know." Monika rested her head on the table. "I really don't."

Compiler's Commentary:

17.1: *Wolfman's ears perk up*

17.2: I very strongly regret that I've got too many other things going on in my life to pick up this remake, because Shadow of the Colossus is honestly one of the greatest products of the PS2 Era.

17.3: The difference between best friends and normal friends is that best friends can have fights like this more than once, and then think little-to-nothing of it afterwards.

17.4: *Wolfman claps a paw over snout, holding in snickers*

17.5: REVENUE STREAM!

17.6: Sayori adopted USApyon's verbal tic for a loop and drove her friends nuts with it.

17.7: *Wolfman rolling around on the floor, laughing hysterically*

17.8: Honestly, I don't think anyone's ever summed up Bayonetta better than Natsuki does here.

17.9: As a card-carrying member of the Kingdom Hearts fandom since '05, I can attest that this is an accurate reaction from most newcomers.

17.10: I'm reminded of when you try to call someone and you get their voicemail, so you leave a message, but you're not available when they get back to you, so they leave a message on your voicemail, and you just keep missing each other like that. And then when you finally get in touch, you can't remember what you wanted in the first place because you didn't include it in your first message. So frustrating. 's why I almost exclusively text people with my phone.

17.11: *Wolfman passed out on the floor from laughing himself stupid*

One Year of Dokis

Chapter 18.

SUPER-EXTRA-SPECIAL DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB FIRST ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION LOOP COMPILATION!

So, last month was the first year anniversary of DDLC's release. Let that sink in, folks. It's been a *year* , already, since Team Salvato unleashed this very, very special kind of kawaii HELL into our lives. I can't say it's been a *full* year for me, personally. I was a couple months late to the party. Thankfully, I did get into it before anyone could spoil me, so I got to enjoy/suffer the full Doki Doki experience.

This time last year, if someone told me a VN would have *consumed* so much of my life…I'll be honest, this time last year I was still struggling with some Kingdom Hearts fanfics, and I wasn't a member of the Infinite Loops Project either. I wasn't even a Spacebattles member. This time last year I was also unemployed and life was just…generally not the best for me? As a matter of fact, I was in a pretty low point and playing something like DDLC should, by all accounts, not have done me any favors at all. Y'know that warning about DDLC not being suitable for the depressed, the anxious, or the easily disturbed? Yeah, by all logic I never should have given DDLC a second look, let alone a playthrough.

Let alone five playthroughs.

But instead of exacerbating my depression, DDLC lit a fire inside of my heart. The Dokies came to feel like little sisters to me, and I developed a mild obsession with writing a happier ending for them. I'm not a modder, so I fell back to my fanfics. Before I could make a lot of progress on that, a friend recommended the RWBY Infinite Loops to me, and got fairly incessant about it, so I fell into that timesink…

So my nascent DDLC fic fell to the wayside as I dove into the Infinite Loops, and then Spacebattles member Wookywok accidentally posted a DDLC snip to the wrong thread, bringing my attention to the fact that the Indie Games: Infinite Loops thread exists and that DDLC was Looping. So I jumped headfirst into that. Then, for whatever reason, Keluvax, the Spacebattles member that started the DDLC Loops and made the original compilation, just fell off of the grid. None of us have any idea what's become of her, but I hope and pray it isn't something too bad. Anyways, after she'd been gone for a while Masterweaver (who you may have noticed has been *very* productive lately, if you pay attention to the authors of the various snips) nominated me to step up as the new compiler, and after a while OracleMask, head of the Indie Games: Infinite Loops thread, gave me the go-ahead.

And now here we are!

So please enjoy!

(EDIT: I don't know how I could have possibly failed to do so when I put this chapter together so long ago, but somehow I neglected to credit Loops writer BIOS-Pherecydes for writing the poems that Masterweaver and I used here. To reclaim my honor, I must now commit Sudoku. Fortunately, I'm pretty alright at logic puzzles, but it's still going to take me some time to work my way through this book of 100,000 Sudoku puzzles. BUT MY HONOR DEMANDS IT!)

Scene 1 (by Masterweaver)

"Keep your eyes closed, Hiroaka..." Sayori giggled as she led her faceless friend down the school hall. "Just a little further and..."

She slid open the door to the club room and dragged him in, gesturing around the room. "TADAAAAA! Happy birthday, Hiroaka!"

Monika clapped as they entered, nodding to them both. Yuri tugged a few confetti poppers, showering them with colored bits of paper. Natsuki blew on a party noisemaker with a deadpan expression.

"What, did you think I'd forget? That's silly, you're silly!" Sayori playfully batted at his arm. "Come on, Natsuki made cake and cupcakes and Yuri made tea and punch and Monika, well, I think Monika's the one that put up all the banners isn't she?"

"It is a REMARKABLE COINCIDENCE that we were all born today," Natsuki commented in a stilted tone. "The exact same number of years ago."

"Yes," Yuri added, much more believably. "I wonder what that says about our parents?"

"Well, whatever the case, which I don't want to speculate about, I hope nobody minds that we're making this a five-way birthday party." Monika smiled at Hiroaka. "Oh, it's alright if you didn't know. We got gifts for you and each other, you didn't need to get anything for us."

"Oh, but he did!" Sayori revealed, her hand darting into Hiroaka's satchel. "He got us all... LUNCH!"

Yuri gasped politely. "Wow. What well-crafted submarine sandwiches! It must have taken you quite a bit of effort to make them."

"They are so long," Natsuki recited tonelessly. "And so full of meat. I can't wait to get my mouth around one."

Monika shot her a look before her face once again took an innocent smile. "I don't think any of us can. They certainly look delicious."

"And he's brought enough to share!" Sayori decreed.

All the girls laughed... well, Natsuki chanted 'Ha Ha Ha Ha' with her arms crossed grumpily. And then, abruptly, Monika held up a hand.

"Okay, player's gone, we can get to the real celebration now."

"Awwwwww," Sayori pouted. "I was having fun!"

"I wasn't," Natsuki quipped.

Yuri rolled her eyes. "Yes, that was quite evident."

"Hiroaka's one of us too," Sayori pointed out. "No matter what you think of him-"

"I know, I know, geeze! I'm sorry, it's just..." Natsuki shook her head and gave Sayori a pleading look. "Can we not... talk about this today? Can we just have fun, as a club, like we... like we should have in baseline?"

Sayori looked at her expression and... nodded. "Alright, alright." She spun around with a grin. "So! As Vice President, I move we get this one-year anniversary celebration started."

"All in favor?" Monika asked. Four hands shot up, with Hiroaka's held up by Sayori a moment afterward. "All opposed?" There were no hands this time. "...Okay, everyone! It's time to party!"

Scene 2 (by Wookywok)

"Alright," Yuri began, "so it was clear from the name that this wasn't going to be your average party game." She examined the rifle in her hand and chuckled. "Still, I wasn't quite expecting Ultimate Pin the Tail on the Donkey to be this... ultimate."

"We're Loopers. Normal's not even in our vocabulary," Natsuki replied, lifting her blindfold from her eyes. "Besides, the Holodeck makes a great shooting range." She Unpocketed a pair of binoculars and began peering into the distance - more specifically, at the large concrete wall painted with a picture of a giant donkey. "Aw, dammit. Missed."

Scene 3 (by me)

"Oh Yuuuuuuuriiiiiii~" Sayori sang.

"…yes?" her tall friend replied.

"HAPPY ANNI-BIRTH-SARY!" Sayori screamed before throwing a small box at her face. With ninja-like reflexes, Yuri caught it without changing her expression.

"You mean 'anniversary', right?" asked Yuri.

Natsuki jumped out of her seat and pointed at Sayori and said, "Your next line is: 'That's exactly what I said.'"

"No, I meant to say anni-birth-sary," Sayori said blithely. She waved a hand and opened a screen in midair, showing the DDLC subreddit. "I got it from our **AWESOMESAUCE** fanbase! It isn't even noon yet and they've already posted a bunch of adorable fanart of us!"

"Sayori what have I told you about showing our fanart in the clubroom?!" demanded Monika, coming back from the supply closet with paper plates and walking into the conversation without context.

"No lewds here, Moni," said Sayori with an eyeroll. "Just anni-birth-sary fanart."

"Oh, well that's okay then," said Monika.

Natsuki, meanwhile, looked completely aghast. "No…no… NOOOOOOOOOO! I screwed it up! *Forgive me, Joseph!* " Natsuki screamed to the heavens, falling down on her knees.

Sayori whipped out a slingshot and used it to send a supernaturally **pink** cupcake straight into Natsuki's mouth. The sounds of ultimate despair were quickly replaced by the sounds of happy nomming.

"So anyways, open up your anni-birth-sary present, Yuri!" Sayori squealed.

"You're not going to stop pushing that word, are you," Monika sighed.

"Well, I *am* Pinkie Pie's a-pie-rentice," Sayori quipped.

"Okay, that one *hurt* ," Natsuki spoke up, "That physically hurt me, Sayori. How dare you," she deadpanned. Sayori shot another pinkcake at her. "All is forgiven~" Natsuki chirped.

Meanwhile, Yuri was tearing into the box. Her eyes widened as she pulled out a slim, seven-inch long matte-black cylinder with silver lilies etched into it. "No way," Yuri gasped softly.

"Could it be?" asked Monika, eyes wide as saucers.

Natsuki walked over to join the others and glanced around Yuri's shoulder at the object. "Ooooooooh snap!"

"Well?! Act–er, wait, ever'body back up. Okay Yuri, activate it!" Sayori crowed.

Everyone backed up, and Yuri assumed a ready stance before clicking the switch on the device. A dark purple blade of electromagnetically-suspended plasma shot out with a *snap-hiss* , extending out to about three and a half feet. Yuri's eyes were the widest any of her friends had ever seen.

"I mean…traditionally, one is supposed to craft their own lightsaber," said Sayori, "But legacy weapons aren't unheard of, and you're not even a Force-sensitive so you wouldn't be able to assemble it the old-fashioned way anyhow. Still, I know you about as well as anyone can know anybody else, so…I'm *pretty sure* I managed to make it the way you would have. And I wish I could say I did it all by myself…but I kinda needed Mace's help finding the right crystals. I… uh, actually made it a while ago, but figured it was the kind of gift that deserved a special oc– *eep* !"

Sayori squeaked as Yuri deactivated and Pocketed her new lightsaber before pulling her into a back-cracking hug. "Thank you, so much Sayori!"

Sayori giggled and returned the hug with interest. "You're very welcome, Yuri~"

Off on the side, Monika heard a loud sniff and glanced aside at Natsuki. Before she could say anything, Natsuki snapped at her, "I'm not crying! *You're* crying!"

Scene 4 (by Awesomedude17)

Monika looked over the notepad in her hand and tapped her chin with a pen.

"Thinking of a celebratory poem, Monika?" Yuri asked.

"Yeah. I think we all should do one."

"You hear that, girls?"

Sayori and Natsuki nodded, taking out some paper and pens themselves.

"End of the day, we read them out."

"Good plan," Monika wrote down the basic structure of the poem to start off with.

Scene 5 (by DrTempo)

As Monika prepared to write her poem, she was thinking to herself.

Who would have thought things would be like this. After what I did in baseline...all the cruel things I did...

I was a monster back then. I ruined other people's lives for my own reasons, and all because I thought it wouldn't mean anything. And then I became an Anchor. I knew I had done horrible things, and I wanted to atone. In a way, I guess that makes me similar to that Sunset Shimmer person Sayori talks about.

She never did the cruel sorts of things I did, but she knew she had made mistakes. And when my friends started Looping, they were

rightfully angry at me at first. But, I showed that I had changed, and now, we're great friends.

And compared to what I wanted in baseline, having their friendship is better than that. I was such a fool. But, I'm not that person anymore. My past is not today.

With that, Monika began writing her poem...

Scene 6 (by Masterweaver)

"Spider cupcakes," Yuri mused. "You remembered!"

"Yeah, I said I'd do them, and here they are." Natsuki handed her one with a grin. "Making arachnid faces took a lot of research, let me tell you. Placement of the eyes, figuring out the mandibles..."

"You went with some sort of jumping spider, I see."

"Yeah, I did a quick search on cute spiders and... well, I mean, they wear water droplets as hats, so... yeah." Natsuki rubbed her head awkwardly. "I mean, I know I could have done something more traditionally creepy, but-"

"It's fine. I love it." Yuri gave her a small smile. "I almost don't want to eat it, it's just... so well crafted."

"...but you're going to, right?"

"Oh, yes of course."

"Right, because... keeping a cupcake without eating it kind of defeats the purpose of the cupcake."

"She's going to keep ~watch~ing you until you ~eaaaat~ it," Sayori singsonged.

"The cat has brought you a kill," Monika intoned. "A gift from the hunt. What will you do, Yuri?"

Natsuki huffed. "I can hear you, you know."

Yuri giggled, finally biting down into the treat. "Mmm... delicious as ever, Nats."

Scene 7 (by Masterweaver)

"So how is this going to work? The gift-giving, I mean." Natsuki gestured around the room. "Is Monika going to receive all her presents, or give all her presents, or are we going to go round robin by receiver or giver, is it going to be one session or-"

"Daisychain," Yuri said, thrusting a gift-wrapped prism at her. "Sayori gave me hers, now I'm giving you one of mine, and you can give one to whoever whenever."

"...Yeah, I guess that makes the most sense." Natsuki took the present, feeling it out. "Is this some sort of book?"

"We are a literature club. We must each give one book and receive one book." Yuri stood tall. "It is in the rules that I am just now legislating and enforcing."

"...Yeah, okay, I got you a book too, but!" Natsuki held up a hand. "You're going to have to wait for it. Let me open this up..."

She tore open the wrapping paper... and blinked. "Wait... wait, wait wait, is this-? You actually found a copy of this?!"

"I heard about it a while ago and, well, it just so happens that the Yo-Kai watch loop we visited is anchored by her brother, so..."

"Ruby Rose's Multiversal Cookie Catalog," Natsuki breathed. "I mean... this is the one with more than cookies, isn't it?"

"And the forward by the flying spaghetti monster, I checked. I figured you'd like something like this."

"Oh, yes, I LOVE this." Natsuki wrapped her arms around the taller girl. "Thank you so much, Yuri! I promise you're going to get first taste out of what I make!"

Yuri giggled, hugging Natsuki back. "Oh curses, you've figured out my sinister plan."

Scene 8 (by me)

"Welp, if Sayori gave Yuri something and Yuri gave me something, guess I should give Monika her gift next," said Natsuki, holding up a rectangular package. "And wouldn't you know it, it's a book!"

Monika snatched it and tore the wrapping off, grinning eagerly. Then her expression crumpled and she stared at Natsuki flatly, holding up the book. " *Programming for Dummies* . Seriously?"

"No, not seriously," said Natsuki, cracking up. "That was just a gag. Obviously. C'mon, whattaya take me for?"

She handed Monika a much larger, more traditional-looking gift-wrapped box with a big green bow on top. Monika eyed it suspiciously, glanced at Natsuki and her small, innocent smile, and opened it. She *almost* dropped the box. "Oh…oh my…" Monika murmured. She sat down in a chair, quickly, as if her legs had been about to give out.

Inside were four stuffed animals: a cat, a dog, a raccoon, and an owl. The cat was bright pink and had a chef's hat perched between its ears, with a wooden spoon attached to one paw and a whisk attached to the other. The dog was a peach-toned cocker spaniel with blue eyes and a red bow on the side of her head, with a blue ball covered in red hearts in its mouth. The raccoon was lavender with black stripes and purple eyes; its snout was stuck into a book held in its front paws, and it was held so that the raccoon's eyes were just barely peeking over the top. Finally, the owl was brown with green eyes, with a large white bow on its head, and it was perched on top of a piano.

The owl was the biggest of the four, with the dog and raccoon both coming up to owl's neck, and the cat–or kitten, more like–coming up to the dog and raccoon's chests. The animals were arranged so that the owl was sitting in one corner, with the dog to the right, the raccoon to the left, and the cat in between them. The owl had its wings wrapped around the other three animals, and it had a smile on its beak. Above the owl's head, stretched across the corner it sat in, was a little banner that said " *Doki Doki Plushy Club!* "

It should go without saying that the animals, both as individuals and as a group, were almost *sickeningly* adorable.

"You can press each key on the piano," Natsuki added, "And each one plays one of our themes. All but the, uh, y'know. Creepy ones…"

Monika practically tackled Natsuki and gave her a crushing hug. "Thank you," she gasped, half-sobbing.

" *Good God it's just a gift don't lose your shit on me,* " Natsuki yelped.

"GROUP GLOMP!" cried Sayori, throwing herself on top of Monika and Natsuki, sort-of-but-not-really-accidentally knocking all three of them to the ground. Yuri slowly and demurely walked over to the three girls, who were half-wrestling as Natsuki tried to shove Monika off, Monika squeezed her tighter and tighter, and Sayori was just trying to cuddle them both.

Then Yuri just flopped down across all three of them, giggling impishly.

Scene 9 (by Masterweaver)

Sayori plopped herself down next to Natsuki. "Hey."

"Sup."

"Not much."

"Cool."

The two of them looked around the room.

"...You know, we never really hang out one on one."

"What?"

"It's always us as part of the club, when we get together. Which... isn't bad, don't get me wrong, but... What have we got, as friends, that no other friendship in this club has?"

Natsuki frowned. "We're... the cute ones?"

"I thought you didn't like being cute."

"Yeah, that was back when 'cute' was equated with 'powerless child who gets no respect.' And even now..." Natsuki nodded toward Yuri and Monika. "Can you see them getting excited over something kawaii? I mean I'm sure they'd like it, but they wouldn't fangirl over it. Not like we would."

"Well, I guess not," Sayori conceded. "So you're okay with being the cute one?"

"As long as you understand cute does not mean small, frail, and helpless."

"Of course not! My mentor is Pinkie frikkin' Pie, the only thing cuter than her in her home universe is Fluttershy and... well, we all know how terrifying both of them can be."

Natsuki chuckled. "Oh yeah, that's right. So... if it's just us, we can be the kawaii loving balls of badass?"

"...you know what? Sure thing."

Scene 10 (by Black Omochao)

"This is turning out to be the best anni-birth-sary ever!" Sayori giggled as she danced around the room.

"I thought you were done saying that," Natsuki groaned.

"Nope!" Sayori grinned, leaning against the wall, before spotting someone standing next to her. "Hmm, Hiroaka? When did you move over here?"

"Huh?" Monika blinked, glancing over where she saw the blank-faced MC previously, before looking back over at where he now stood by Sayori. "… Hmmm."

"What's on your mind, buddy? You think this anni-birth-sary is awesome too, right?" Sayori smiled widely, ignoring as Natsuki facepalmed.

Hiroaka said nothing as he stared at Sayori with his expressionless face, before he suddenly slumped over, four small items falling off his person.

"Huh, Hiroaka? You okay?" Sayori looked concerned, before she glanced down at the objects that had dropped from him and blinked. "… Guys!"

"We're all in the same room, Sayori. You don't have to yell," Yuri pointed out.

"What is it?" Monika questioned curiously.

Sayori gained a huge smile as she lifted up four small items, wrapped with bows colored the same as the hair of the dokis. "Hiroaka got us presents!"

"… What," Natsuki's expression went blank.

"Oh, happy anni-birth-sary to you too, Hiroaka! You didn't have to do that!" Sayori cheered as she handed each of her Looping friends their presents.

"But… I know he does unexplained stuff sometimes, but… this doesn't make any sense, right?" Yuri asked as she was handed a soda can with a dark bow. She and Natsuki both looking towards Monika for answers.

"I… yeah, I don't know. I say don't question it," the president admitted with a shake of her head, being handed a pack of gummy bears from Sayori.

"Aw, you got me a can of coffee! That's so sweet!" Sayori gushed over the gift from her faceless friend.

"Thank you, Hiroaka," Yuri smiled, staring at the soda she was given. "… I think."

Natsuki frowned as she looked at her 'gift,' before glaring in Hiroaka's direction with a look that was somewhere between befuddlement, annoyance and resignation. "Peanuts…?"

"Hmm…" Monika looked at her gummy bears.

"Happy anni-birth-sary Hiroaka! Happy anni-birth-sary everyone!" Sayori cheered as she grabbed Hiroaka in a hug

"Stop saying that!" Natsuki snapped, still glaring at the pack of peanuts she was given.

Monika stared at Hiroaka with a suspicious look for a moment, before shaking her head with a dismissive wave.

Scene 11 (by me)

The clubroom was literally half-full of candy. It had been completely full of candy, until Yuri had made it over to a window and opened it. "Natsuki, *what* did you use to make that piñata?" asked Monika.

" *Sayori* made the piñata, I just filled it," Natsuki countered before she Majin'd up and started *inhaling* the candy. The other three

quickly started Pocketing armfuls until the room was mostly cleared of the sweet sugary debris.

"I didn't make the piñata either. I commissioned it from Master Pinkie. I just converted it into code," explained Sayori as they cleaned the mess. After they were done she clapped her hands and said, "Well, it's been a while since the last gift. Monika, you ready?"

"Yeah, guess I'm next," said Monika a bit hesitantly, pulling a gift-box out of thin air. "And for the sake of closing the circle, my first gift is for Sayori. Here you go, Vee-pee."

"Yay~" Sayori bubbled, taking the hefty box and setting it down. She ripped the wrapping off and opened the box. As soon as she did, *glaringly* bright light poured out. It was as if sunlight was shooting up out of the box. No heat, though. A pair of 8-bit pixelated sunglasses materialized on Sayori's face, then she reached into the box. She pulled out a glass bottle, one of a dozen that were in the box. It was full of clean, white light.

"The…um, the cap doesn't, uh, come off. It's more like a dial? Left to dim, right to bright. They're tuned to your voice, and you can…um… give them commands, I guess? Like 'color shift: pink' or 'visual effect: strobe' or something like that. Or 'copy color', which will make the light assume the exact shade of color of whatever surface the bottle is sitting on. There's a manual that fully explains the command prompt system inside the box."

Sayori's "sunglasses" glitched out of existence as she twisted the cap left until the light was dim enough to be comfortably looked at directly. She just stared at it owlishly. Her expression didn't change at all, but tears started slipping down from the corners of her eyes. "It's a bottle full of light," she said, very softly.

"…well, I just…figured it was high time I gave you these back," said Monika, rubbing the side of her face awkwardly.

Calmly, Sayori placed the bottle back in the box, then dimmed down all the other bottles before closing the box, so that the next time she opened it she wouldn't be blinded. She laid a hand on the box, and it disappeared into her Pocket. Then, she slowly walked over to Monika and gently wrapped her arms around her, squeezing tightly. "Thank you, Monika," she said in a small, shaky voice.

"Happy Anni-birth-sary, little buddy," Monika said back.

Off to the side, Yuri leaned down and whispered to Natsuki, "Let me guess. You're not crying, I'm crying?"

Natsuki rolled her eyes and elbowed Yuri in the side, even as she was blowing her nose into a frilly handkerchief. "Shuddup," she muttered with a smile.

Scene 12 (by me)

After everyone had recovered from the latest feels trip, Sayori conjured another gift box. "Natsuki's is next. Been holding onto this one for *centuries* . Fortunately, things don't age physically in data-form; otherwise I'm not sure I could have kept this in such pristine condition," she said as she handed the box to Natsuki.

Expression curious, Natsuki opened the box and pulled out a book. It was titled in Japanese, and the cover depicted a small boy with a red cap turned backwards on his head; the title translated to ' *Diary of Ma-chan* '. Natsuki recognized it instantly, but she didn't really react until she opened it and saw what was scrawled on the inside of the front cover, also in Japanese:

' *For little Natsuki-chan* '

' *From Tezuka Osamu* '

"Hu-wha-ba-fuuuuu," Natsuki garbled as her eyes rolled back and she almost collapsed on the spot. Fortunately Yuri was right next to

her and caught her by the arm before her bottom could meet the floor. Natsuki looked torn between passing out and hyperventilating.

"…okay, I'll bite," said Monika, "I'm no manga aficionado. Sayori, what did you just give her?"

Sayori opened her mouth, but Yuri beat her to the metaphorical buzzer. "Osamu Tezuka's very first published manga–a collection of all seventy-two strips, I'm assuming–with his autograph, addressed to Natsuki," she recited.

"Yeah. Woke Up one Hub-loop as a World War Two Imperial Japanese nurse. Was *not* a fun time. Buuuut, I managed to meet the man himself and get this copy signed. Told him Natsuki was my daughter's name. Heh-heh," said Sayori, rubbing the back of her head.

"Osamu Tezuka…" Monika murmured, eyes skyward in search of recollection. "He's that old mangaka that did Black Jack and Astro Boy, right?"

" *Tetsuwan Atom* , you pleb!" Natsuki suddenly exclaimed, coming back to her senses and looking slightly indignant.

Even Yuri was staring at Monika coolly. "Really, Monika? Manga is one of the biggest passions of one of your dearest friends, and you can't be bothered to remember the name of the man that *all* Japanese know as the *godfather of manga* ?"

"…um…you do realize we're *technically* not…er…" Monika's voice died off under the weight of Yuri and Natsuki's cold glares. Sayori had taken a step back and seemed to be admiring the ceiling.

"Alright, *fine* . I apologize sincerely for my *blasphemous* ignorance of otaku lore, alright?" Monika sighed.

"It's like if one of us gave you an autograph from Socrates, or Roger Bacon," said Yuri, "Or if Sayori had given me an autograph from

Edgar Allen Poe, or H.P. Lovecraft. You know?"

"Alright, yes, I get it. I'm sorry," Monika said more sincerely.

"Thanks, Sayori!" Natsuki suddenly gushed, giving their vice president a big hug. As she did so, she side-eyed Monika and said, "Your present better be pretty mindblowing, Prez, because it's got some tough acts to follow."

"…it's not a competition, Nats," Sayori admonished her monotonously.

Scene 13 (by Masterweaver)

"Okay. Okay so, my turn again?" Natsuki cleared her throat. "Well, let's not make this circular. Yuri?"

Yuri blinked. "What... yes?"

"I have something special for you." She held out a rectangular package. "I can almost promise you have never seen anything like it."

"Almost?" Yuri mused, taking it and working open the wrapping. "Why?"

"For one, it's written by a looper. For another, it's sixth edition. And, well... Leeeet's just say I really had to work up the gumption to talk to the people who had the book..."

Yuri finished unwrapping the gift and looked, bemused, at a plain black book with unassuming silver letters. "'Anything Can Instill Fear' by... who is Mike Schmidt?"

Monika's eyes shot wide. "Five Nights is *Looping?!"*

"Yeah, that was my reaction too," Natsuki admitted, "but on the whole it's not the worst reality, and the loopers are... not nearly as terrible as they were in baseline. We swapped stories about trauma,

got to know each other, and I mean... come on, cats have sharp teeth and people think they're cute. So, yeah, I got this off of them."

Yuri opened the book, looking over the table of contents. "I assume it's a horror collection?"

"Yeah. I mean I haven't read it, not my thing, but apparently they collected all kinds of horror stories, from good to bad, as an examination of the flexibility and possibility of the genre. And of course, I know you like horror, so-"

"Oh, yes. This... this is going to last me a good long while." Yuri smiled at Natsuki. "Thank you. Truely, I know this must have been a lot more uncomfortable for you than you're pretending it is."

"What, getting a book of wildly varied horror stories from a collection of the mutliverse's most infamous subversions of cuteness and jump-scare experts and carrying it around for a few dozen loops until today? Naaaaaah, it was... it was..." Natsuki shook her head. "Alright, fine, maybe it was a little creepy for me. But hey, you have it now, you like it, everything's golden, do you have something you want to give somebody?"

Scene 14 (by Masterweaver)

"Hmmmm." Yuri considered for a moment. "Well... Monika, here you go."

Monika took the gift-wrapped package and opened it... then rolled her eyes. "'A Beginner's Guide to Programming.' Did you and Natsuki plan this?"

"Surprisingly, no." Yuri handed her a large envelope with a small grin. "But yes, that was a gag gift. Here's your real one."

The club president gave her a wary look, but opened the envelope and looked inside. For a moment, she could do naught but stare.

"It's... not much, I suppose," Yuri admitted, running her fingers through her hair. "I mean, I tried to think of something personal, and... this is really the best I could think of."

Monika reached in, delicately withdrawing the envelope's content. At first glance, perhaps, it looked like a quill, made of the feather of some large black bird. But a closer examination would reveal oddities; the barbs were not merely smooth divisions, but bent and interlaced at oddly mathematical angles, catching light and refracting in a pattern that most would associate with a circuit board. The shaft of the quill was wrapped not in soft feathers, nor the hard metal of a nib's shank; it was graced, gently, by a grip suited perfectly for her fingers. A small light pulsated up the core when she held it, and the whole thing seemed to twist, just slightly, angling to let her see the point clearly.

"...It's... well, it's a bit of a fancy blend of magic and technology," Yuri admitted. "It took me a while to figure out how to make it, I... don't usually work on things like this. The, um, feather spots can be used to change the color of the ink, the thickness of the lines... I wanted it to be able to generate endless ink, but the best I could do was have drain the core of pencils as a source. I did put my notes on the design in that envelope, if you think you... if you need to improve on it-"

"It... it's lovely, Yuri." Monika smiled at her. "It really is."

Scene 15 (by Masterweaver)

"Okay..." Monika rubbed her head awkwardly. "So... Yuri. In some ways, you are the one who I hurt the most, and... as much as this is a celebration of how far we've come, for me it is also a way to... make amends, I suppose." She pursed her lips. "So... I've done some research and... well.."

A box was brought forth, gently, awkwardly. Yuri took it, quirking an eyebrow, and carefully pulled out a complex set of interposed gears.

"...Um." She turned it around. "Oh! It's... a hairclip, I guess...?"

"It, um... well..." Monika cleared her throat. "It... can get an empathetic read on your state of mind. I included an instruction manual, but... you know... in case you get affected by any mind-altering stuff... it'll let you know, with the motion of the wheels. There's a matched wristband, so you don't have to take it off your head, if..."

She trailed off.

Yuri nodded, slowly. "I... understand. Really, I do. It's actually a very thoughtful gift, Monika, thank you. I... I'll make sure to look it over in detail."

Scene 16 (by Masterweaver)

"Why do we call him Hiroaka, though?" Natsuki waved a hand. "I mean, he's the Main Character, an Insert Name Here, and sure that's a mouthful and giving him a name makes it easier for us to talk about him, but... why Hiroaka, of all things?"

"...That was the name entered in my first loop," Monika admitted. "And... I guess I might have just kept calling him that, even after Sayori started looping... just filled in the name myself?"

"Really? That's it?"

"It's also... kind of a pun? Hero, also known as... Hiroaka."

"Mmmhmm..."

"What? What are you mmhmming, hmm?"

"Sayo *ri* . Natsu *ki* . Yu *ri* . And... Moni *ka* ." Natsuki smirked at her, though her eyes seemed oddly soft. "Sure you weren't just a little lonely there, prez?"

Monika glanced away. "...I definitely was lonely," she admitted, in an undertone.

"...yeah, well, you aren't now."

"No... I'm not. Thanks, Nats. You know, for... giving me a chance, even after everything."

"...yeah, sure, whatever."

Scene 17 (by Masterweaver, poem written by BIOS-Pherecydes)

I have a special bubble

I keep all my important things inside it, tucked away safely where they can never be found

If I keep my bubble protected, nothing can hurt me

As long as I hold it tight nothing can ever pop it

When I'm by myself sometimes I like to listen to my bubble

It's not very loud but I can always hear it

A soft, gentle beat that only my bubble can play

Even if it's not that good it's still a song only for me

Sometimes it's hard to hold onto my bubble

It wants to dance in the sunlight and be carried away on gentle wind

It's dangerous to let it float freely though

Because it wouldn't take much to break it

If I gave my bubble away to someone, would I get one in return?

Would whoever found my bubble watch over it carefully?

I hope so

Since I already let it go

Please take good care of it

Sayori's eyes fell as she finished her poem. "I... I know it's not exactly the most uplifting poem I've written. But, you know, I just... I felt like... if it's just us, and if we're being honest-"

"It's a very deep expression," Yuri assured her. "The structure... resonates. I think I... I think it touches the readers deeply... or the intended audience, I suppose..."

"Yeah, the metaphors, and the... the words, they..." Natsuki fumbled for a bit, before sighing. "Screw it. Group hug for Sayori?"

"Group hug for Sayori," Monika agreed. "Don't worry, we'll take good care of your bubble."

Sayori gave a tearful smile as she was enveloped in three pairs of arms. "You all already do..."

Scene 18 (by me)

"I mean…it's kind of a poor follow-up to what you gave me, but–"

"I'm going to have to stop you, right there," Sayori interjected, "Like I told Natsuki, this isn't a competition. I know how you work; whatever you got me, I already know you put an insane amount of thought into it, and it'll probably take me years before I realize just how perfect it really is."

"Ah…"

"And now you've gone and given her performance anxiety. GG, Ri-Ri," Natsuki said dryly. Then she blew into a noisemaker.

Yuri cleared her throat, and then presented her gift box to Sayori. Sayori then proceeded to tear into the box, lovingly yet ferociously. Like a hamster starved for affection. Truly, the stuff of nightmares, that image.

As soon as she opened the box, she squeed and dropped the box, Force Levitating the gift itself between her hands. "Oh gosh, is this what I think it is?!" Sayori asked.

"Please tell me it's not that cursed comb from Snow White," said Natsuki.

"Why would Yuri give Sayori that? Why would Sayori *hope* it was that?" Monika asked.

"Yuri's got creepy tastes and Sayori's a Sith lord. They could probably get up to some seriously sinister chicanery if they wanted to," replied Natsuki.

"Oh wow, we really could!" Sayori said excitedly as she removed her hairbow.

"See what I mean?" said Natsuki. "I don't think you realize how much our friendly little VP has taken the whole 'Dark Side' thing to heart, Monika. Heck, between her steadily increasing deviancy and your unrelenting contrition, I'm starting to wonder which of you I really need to be keeping an eye on."

"Good thing you've got two, then!" chirped Sayori, who was running her new comb through her hair.

Which was now shoulder-length.

"The heck?" asked Natsuki.

"I mean, clearly it's one of those 'make the hair longer' combs from a beauty boutique game. Probably Barbie or some such," said Monika. "Didn't you ever play one as a kid, Nats?"

"No, I played RPGs and VNs, like a proper geek," said Natsuki.

Meanwhile, Yuri gave Monika a peeved look. "This isn't something I just picked up in another game Loop. It's a gift I made myself, using some of the Umbran magic Miss Bayonetta taught me."

"Oh…yeah, that makes sense. A comb like that would be useful for an Umbran Witch to have," said Monika.

"Ohmygosh is this gonna–"

"No, sorry, it's not going to make your hair magic…and how long are you going to grow it out?" asked Yuri. Sayori's hair was starting to pool around her feet.

"Well, I was thinking, if this comb won't give me hair powers, maybe I could just grow out a bunch of my hair, cut it off, and turn it into a whip!" said Sayori.

"A Sayori hair-whip. Huh." Monika started looking thoughtful.

"Thanks Yuri!" Sayori squealed happily…stilling combing her hair out.

Scene 19 (by me)

Monika's eyes widened as soon as Sayori presented her with a parcel wrapped up in a bright green bow. Despite Natsuki and Yuri's gags, Monika trusted Sayori implicitly. Without a second thought, she tore off the wrapping. Immediately, her face fell, and she looked up at Sayori with the expression of a kicked puppy. In her hands was a copy of the most recent edition of Princess Cadence and Slaanesh's *The Big Book of Love* , a famous Looper book on the art of pursuing romance. Monika's reaction was to narrow her eyes to slits and chuck the book at Sayori, who ducked to avoid it. "Dang it, Sayori, we've gone over this *a billion times* !"

"And we'll go over it a trillion times more until I get my point across!" Sayori fired back, arms folded, eyes narrowed, and cheeks puffed out in a classic 'Angry Chipmunk Glare'. "You've got a problem, and as your best friend, I'm obligated to shove this problem in your face until you do something about it. As president, our happiness is your responsibility, and as vice-president *your* happiness is *my* responsibility."

Monika stood up and put her hands on her hips, glaring right back at Sayori. "And I *am* happy enough being single, thank you very not. And even if wanted to…to look into…that sort of thing…I wouldn't start with a…pop-up book?"

"Whaaaaat? This is a great book!" Sayori said with a pout. "You have no idea the kind of focus it took for me to remember to ask Slaany for a copy in the middle of a Chaos God party!"

"…okay, I'm cool with you being Pinkie Pie's apprentice and all–in fact I'm pretty sure it might be the best thing that's ever happened to you–but please tell me you're not really that close to those maniacs from the Dark Millennium?" Monika asked.

"You still sore about that time you were the God-Empress of Mankind and lost at Pan-Galactic Speed Chess to Tzeeny?" asked Sayori.

Judging by Monika's withering look, Sayori reckoned she'd landed a bull's-eye. She gave a long, forlorn, and thoroughly defeated sigh. "Fine…I'll concede *this* fight, but I will yet win the war! But for now, I had a feeling you might take exception to my generous gift, so I had this prepared as a back-up." Sayori put *The Big Book of Love* back in her Pocket and presented Monika with a new package. It looked suspiciously like another book.

Monika gave her dearest friend a skeptical look, but she took the bow off the book and gave it a critical look. Then her eyebrows popped way up and her jaw dropped like an anvil from a fourth-story window. "This… *this* is…" she looked up at Sayori in open shock, "Sayori, how did you ever get your hands on this?!"

"Sheer dumb luck!" Sayori said with a grin. "What you hold in your hands, my friend, is an advice manual for Anchors penned by the one and only Anchor to ever stand on the other side of an Admin's terminal."

"Hold the hell on, you got a book written by *Madoka fucking Kaname* ?!" asked Natsuki incredulously.

"Yepyep! Got it from my buddy Sayaka," Sayori said happily. "I was lucky enough to share a loop with her recently, and knowing this was coming up I asked her if she had any ideas, I asked her, "Sayaka, if all sense of rhyme and reason got turned inside out and you found yourself actually *actual* BFFs with Kyubey (and at this point I had to wait a while for her to stop laughing) what would you give him as a birthday present?" She totally wouldn't take my question seriously until I explained that I was actually talking about you. Then she just handed me this book and said it was the best gift any Anchor could ever get."

"…part of me is annoyed you would compare me to the Incubator that way…I mean seriously I know we have a couple traits in common but I don't think we have much if any common ground concerning what we would like as birthday presents…but all the same, I appreciate the gift very much. Thank you, Sayori," said Monika, putting the book away in her Pocket to read on her own time.

Scene 20 (by Masterweaver)

Monika swallowed. "Natsuki... when you started looping, you had... you'd seen the worst I could inflict, and you rightly didn't trust me. In fact, you kept up the tradition of making sure I... making sure I knew when I was having a moral failing. You hid your pain so that you could tend to the others, and... even now, after we've become friends again, I feel like you took on so many burdens you shouldn't have. I... it's hard to explain why, knowing that I did so much worse for Sayori and Yuri, why I still feel like-"

Natsuki clamped a hand over her mouth. "Let me sum up what's going through your head. 'I'm sorry I was such a bitch in baseline, here is something I personally crafted to make sure my bitchiness didn't hurt you permanently.' Is that about it?"

Monika blinked for a moment, and then nodded.

"Right." Natsuki withdrew her hand. "Okay, bring it on prez. What deeply metaphorical yet useful mystical item did you get me?"

Monika handed her a plush pink paladin.

"...Huh."

"It *is* enchanted," the girl explained. "If you hold it close, it'll... become an actual set of armor. Soft armor, mind, but the kind that hardens rapidly when dangerous impacts hit."

"You know something...? I like it. I like the idea behind it, I like how it looks, and I like how it feels." Natsuki nodded. "Thanks, Monika. I'll... keep it close."

Scene 21 (by Masterweaver)

"Yuri's giving everyone magical gifts, Monika's giving everyone meaningful gifts, Sayori's giving everyone wacky gifts... and I guess I just gave people mundane stuff."

The other girls all rolled their eyes. "Natsuki," Yuri said flatly, "it's not a competition. What counts is that you thought about it."

"Yeah, I know, I know... still, kind of strange to top it off with something this ordinary." Natsuki held out a pair of headphones. "Here you go, Sayori. Happy ani-birth-versery."

Sayori took the headphones with a questioning look. "Okay...? Oh, there's an attached... doohicky. Is this an iPod?"

"Mmmm, it's a music player of some sort," Natsuki hedged. "One of those bland name product things that float around the multiverse. I made sure it was good enough for the playlist."

"Oh, there's a *playlist!* Okay." Sayori chuckled, putting the headphones on and hitting the button. "I'm sure it's a bunch of very..."

Her voice trailed off, eyes widening as the sounds contained on the player made their way from the headphones to her ears.

"...you know," Natsuki murmured, "for those times when... you need a reminder. When you need to drown out the voices in your head. Just... yeah, I figured-"

"-how... how many people-?"

"As many as you've ever met, and as many who I could convince. And a lot of them contributed more than one track."

"Um..." Monika cleared her throat. "What... is this?"

"...they..." Sayori swallowed back tears. "People... just telling me what I mean to them... how much I..." She shook her head, stopping the soundtrack. "Yes, this... thanks, Nats. I... I'll need this sometimes, it's very... thoughtful."

"It's... no trouble at all. Really."

Scene 22 (by Masterweaver, poem by BIOS-Pherecydes)

I always hear people talking about what they'd do if they could live forever

They'd run, and laugh, and cry, and play, and learn so many new things

They'd never grow old or sad

They'd spend their time better if they had more to spend

I think that's a silly idea

Because forever is a long time

I like to look at flowers on sunny days

Red and blue and yellow as far as the eyes can see

Everything beautiful goes away eventually though

That's what makes it beautiful

Nothing lasts forever

Because forever is a long time

Sometimes I watch the clouds drift by

So bright and fluffy

Except when they're full of rain

Black, angry shadows that pour their darkness down until they're empty

But the rain can't fall forever

Because forever is a long time

All things change eventually I think

Even people

When people drift apart that's sad

But sometimes they don't and that's good

Maybe some things should last forever

Because forever is a long time.

"...It is, isn't it?" Monika murmured.

Yuri nodded. "For all the complexities of eternity, we often forget the simple joys."

"That... was beautiful, Nats." Sayori swallowed. "I... thank you, for sharing that."

Natsuki rubbed her neck. "Yeah, well. You know. It... is what it is."

Scene 23 (by me, poem by BIOS-Pherecydes)

Spiraling eternities dance upon a spider's web

Gossamer strands of possibility and destiny

Such delicate workings, so easily tarnished by careless hands

Does the butterfly trapped in its prison feel remorse for paths not taken?

Perhaps the weaver may yet spare its prey

But all for naught, as the butterfly unknowingly flies into the web anew

Either unaware or uncaring of its final fate

Tangled shards of distant light glimmer upon the sea of endless chances

Reflecting a myriad illusion of imaginary freedom

Seafoam flies into the air as though unwanted chaff from the mill

Lost in the turmoil of crashing waves

Reaching hands seek the sky and are pulled beneath the surface

A soul adrift and battered by the eternal tide

Ever drowning but never drowned

A figure stands upon an absolute plane

An infinite expanse of infinite nothing

Purpose and meaning forever beyond their grasp

Yet forever striving for that which cannot be found

Shadows dance in the periphery and one becomes many

Still separate and disconnected by the inexorable weight of impossibility

Solitude shared, but not lessened

"Sounds like hot nonsense, but very *pretty* -sounding hot nonsense, as usual," said Natsuki with a grin as she golfclapped.

"Natsuki," said Monika, clapping more energetically, "Don't be a shit."

"Quit stamping on my rights as a tsundere!"

"It's fine, Monika," said Yuri with a giggle as she tucked her paper away, "I expect nothing less from our *precious* little pink *gerbil* ."

"…we duel to the death at dawn, Edge," Natsuki said with a tight smile.

"Love you too, little buddy," Yuri said with a more genuine smile.

Meanwhile, Sayori was just staring at a while with the cosmos in her eyes, muttering "Whoa" under her breath over and over again.

Scene 24 (by Masterweaver, poem by BIOS-Pherecydes)

I didn't know

I thought I understood, but I was mistaken

I looked for meaning, but I found none

I sought answers, but I found only more questions

The Lady Who Knows Everything knew nothing

Blinded by her own sense of superiority

Drowned by her despair

Jealous of the feather that drifted free upon the wind

Errors accumulate without end

Failures compound exponentially

The task resumes ad nauseum

All is (void)

Nothingness returns to being

A new instance begins

If, and, or, then

Because

Anger burns, but exhausts itself eventually

Despair suffocates, but drains away in time

Hope ebbs and flows, inconsistent

Regret abides, eternally

The hole still stands before me

Teasing an escape that does not exist

I dare to glimpse within, only to find myself staring back

Outside is just another Inside

With less company

The room was silent for a moment.

"...I know it's... not very original," Monika said quietly. "I... just wanted to put out what... what I felt, when the loops started. When I learned the scope of things, and... and how much this... how much you all... mean to me."

Sayori gave her a cryptic look for a moment or two.

Then, silently, she stood up and wrapped Monika in a hug. It was less than a second before the other two joined in.

Scene 25 (by me)

" *And after nineteen hours, thirty-seven minutes, and fifteen-point-seven-six-seven-four seconds,* " Natsuki yelled into a microphone, " *Yuri has bested Monika for the Doki Doki Literature Club Ping Pong Championship!* "

Yuri bowed respectfully towards Monika, and humbly towards the audience (i.e. Sayori and Hiroaka), and caught the crown of laurels Natsuki flung her way.

"And surprising none of us, Yuri's hand-eye-coordination continues to reign supreme," said Sayori, standing up and stretching. "I was starting to worry that you two were going to keep it up straight on to the end of the Loop! Speaking of which, what's our time Prez?"

Monika blinked. "We've got about…four hours left to Loop's end. And the ping pong thing was Yuri's idea, so Natsuki gets to pick our last activity."

"Alright!" Natsuki squealed with a fist pump. "Just as planned! Good job, Yuri." She gave Yuri a thumbs-up.

"Hold on," said Monika, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "You *meant* to drag this out for this long, Yuri? Did you *choose* when to end the match?!"

Yuri just stared impassively back at her, twirling her paddle around her finger. "Am I not the Ping-Pong champion?" she asked, almost innocently.

Monika just fell over, from standing up to lying down sideways in a *perfectly* ninety-degree arc, with the sound effect of a gong.

Then she sprited herself back into an upright standing position with a sheepish smile. "One of these days, I've really got to learn to stop underestimating you girls. So I take it you've got something in mind for topping off the Loop, Natsuki. What've you got for us?"

"Well we've got a couple hours and we're all a bit tired, so I would like to institute…a nap pile!" Natsuki declared.

"Nap pile?" Monika asked.

"Yeah, like a hug pile, but with naps," said Natsuki. " *Buuuuut* , I've got some very specific conditions in mind." Then she sidled up to Monika and tip-toed up to whisper something in her ear.

"Hrm…I see…I see…interesting…uh-huh…yeah, yeah I think I can do all that." Monika glanced over at Sayori and Yuri, then back at Natsuki. "You tell them about this?"

Natsuki shook her head. "I asked Sayori a couple questions about code and I asked Yuri to see if she could make her activity last until

we only had a few hours left. Besides that, I've been keeping this one close to my chest."

"Gotcha. Veepee, Yuyu, you girls okay with some mild-to-moderate…body-modding?" Monika asked.

"Well since it's Natsuki's idea, I know it won't be very *exotic* ," Yuri remarked. Natsuki glared at her. "But her ideas usually aren't entirely *un* -fun either. Sure, I'm down."

"Natsuki always has awesome ideas! I'm ready for anything," said Sayori.

"Alright. Stand-by for overwrite!" said Monika, throwing her hands up theatrically.

Everything changed .

The clubroom was replaced with a never-ending plane of some kind of plush, comfortable, fluffy surface. It *looked* like a grassy field, but there was no dirt in sight, but the grass didn't seem at all scratchy. It almost felt like velvet, yet the faint smell of freshly cut grass permeated the landscape.

Warm, golden sunlight filtered down through a sparsely-clouded sky. It seemed somewhat toned down from real sunlight, just enough that it wasn't glaring. Furthermore, there wasn't exactly a "sun" in the sky for one to blind oneself by accidentally looking directly at. But there was a nice balance between deep cerulean sky and procedurally generated clouds of fairly interesting shapes.

As for Monika, Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki…they were all catgirls.

"… *really* , Natsuki?" asked Yuri, looking atypically irritated. Whether the feline features were only the cause of her annoyance, or also enhancing said irritated appearance…

"Hey, trust me, I get it. Better than *any of you* . But trust me, this is the *best* way to nap," said Natsuki emphatically.

"NAP PILE!" squealed Sayori, wrapping her arms around Natsuki and Yuri, pulling them forward and tackling Monika, and pulling them all down to the ground.

What little was left of the loop was passed without words. Just four friends laughing and wrestling the last of their energy away until they all fell asleep more or less on top of each other.

Somewhere a cosmic chronometer ticked over, reality inverted like an hourglass being turned on its head, and eternity kept rolling along for the Literature Club.

Dokis at a Wedding!

Chapter 19.

Special Compilation: Doki-Dokies at the Bumblebee Wedding!

Scene 1: Dokies, to the Wedding!

(DDLC!)/(RWBY)/(Half-Life)

(By me)

"I don't get it," commented Natsuki. "We're in a fleshy-loop, we all Woke Up at the same time, there were a *bunch* of Pings…and it's been two days, and *nothing's happened* . This many Loopers at once means a *massive* Fused Loop, which usually doesn't just happen. Something's going on, but it feels like we're being left out…"

Yuri, sitting across the table from her and reading a book, nodded her agreement.

"Girls!" exclaimed Monika as she rushed into the clubroom, "This is it! I just got the call from the Remnant Loopers!"

"Remnant…" muttered Sayori, and then gasped, "You mean…this is *that* Loop?"

"This is the Loop!" Monika confirmed joyously, "This is the *Wedding* Loop!"

Her club members squealed with joy, only for Yuri to gasp, "But wait! We're on Earth…how are we getting to Remnant?"

"Penny gave me the coordinates for Remnant. She offered to help us get there, since that's her job for this loop, but she seemed *really* stressed out…so I told her we would make our own way," said

Monika. Then she looked straight at Sayori. "You've got the hook-up, right, Veepee?"

"Oh-ho-HO!" said Sayori, jumping up onto a table, "Do I *ever* !" she exclaimed triumphantly. "How far away is Remnant from Earth?"

"Pretty far…but at top speed, we should get there well within the day," said Monika as she lead the girls out of the room.

"Okay, you guys are being cryptic. What do you know that we don't?" asked Natsuki, "You don't know what they're on about, right, Yu?" Yuri shook her head.

"Sayori picked up something… *very* interesting in her last Star Wars loop, and I asked her to keep it a secret for a while. For a dramatic occasion such as this," said Monika.

"Damn it, Monika, you're such a cartoon sometimes," Natsuki muttered amusedly.

The four girls made their way out of the school. "Okay, everyone. We need to make our way out of town. Somewhere Sayori can Unpocket…something pretty big, without any civilians seeing."

"Oh, come on, Monika, quit with the mystery game," Natsuki snapped, "It's *obviously* a spaceship."

"You'll understand when you see it," said Sayori with a smile.

"Anyways, I've already got a place in mind, and it would be simplest for us to ride there together," said Monika, "So if you're at all fond of your cars, best go Pocket them now."

"Nah, mine's a cheap fuckin' lemon," grumbled Natsuki, dropping a quarter into a nearly-full glass jar that Sayori thrust in her direction.

"I'm a bus rider," said Sayori, Pocketing her swear jar.

"A moment, please," said Yuri before running off. A moment later, she came roaring back.

"What the heck is that?" asked Natsuki, pointing at Yuri's motorcycle.

"Kawasaki Ninja H2," Yuri stated proudly as the bike disappeared into her Subspace Pocket. "Street legal version of the track-only H2R model, the fastest production motorcycle in the Hub."

Sayori whistled. "How much did that set you back? Are you rich this loop?"

"Not this loop," Yuri admitted as the four of them proceeded to pile into Monika's car, "I actually got this in my last Hub loop, where I was indeed a wealthy young businesswoman. I have an H2R in my Pocket as well, in addition to several other high-performance motorcycles. You could say it's a fairly recent hobby of mine."

"Huh. Didn't think you'd like something so…noisy," said Sayori.

"She probably likes it for the thrill factor," Natsuki reasoned, "And the fact that a motorcycle is basically a really big vib–"

" *Natsuki* !" Yuri gasped, looking a little scandalized.

…

Outside of the city, in the middle of absolutely nowhere, Monika pulled over to the side of the road and stopped her car. They all got out, and walked out into the large, grassy field. "Alright, Sayori. Blow 'em away," said Monika, sweeping her arm out grandly.

"Better not be some anticlimactic nonsense," Natsuki grumbled, "Cuz I'm actually invested in this, now. Whatcha got for us, Sunny?"

Sayori walked a few paces away from the others. She put out both hands. And then, after a brief pause for dramatic effect, she Unpocketed–

" *A Millennium Falcon* ?!" Yuri and Natsuki gasped with apropos gravitas.

Indeed, it was none other than The Alleged Car of spaceships. It had been repainted with a mainly sky-blue scheme, with some black and pink accents, and it had what appeared to be a medieval-style trebuchet attached to the topside, as well as a…wait, was that a bounce-house?

"How?!" Natsuki gasped, "I mean, I'm sure Han Solo has copies in his Pocket, but does he actually give them away?"

"Not this one, at least," said Sayori, looking supremely self-satisfied. "This one, I won from an Unawake Lando Calrissian *before* Han could get it in the first place. Oh-ho, the look on his face when he Woke Up…I mean, it's not nearly as impressive as Master's Party Star, but I'm proud of her all the same."

"Did you rechristen it?" asked Yuri as the four of them approached the ship.

"Course I did, silly!" Sayori giggled. She stepped onto the ramp, spun about-face, and curtsied to her friends. "Welcome, my dearest friends, aboard the *Eternal Sunshine* !"

…

"Hokie-jokie, Doki-Dokis," said Sayori as she skipped along towards the cockpit, "Mony, give Blinky the coordinates and join me up in the cockpit. Yuri, you know Binary, right? See if the Pinky, Inky, and Clyde need help with anything. Natsuki, you're on snack detail. Kitchen-type-thingy is that-a-way."

The inside of the ship, as anyone would suspect of anything belonging to Sayori, was chaotically decorated with murals and paintings that wouldn't look out-of-place in a kindergarten, in addition to hanging beads and disco balls, wind chimes, what appeared to be baby mobiles, banners exclaiming inspirational slogans, Motivational

Posters, Demotivational Posters, and other memetic pictures, and of course every bit of wallspace not already accounted for was covered with photographs. A good few depicted Sayori's fellow Literature Club Loopers, but most of them were of Sayori and Pinkie Pie, with periodic inclusions of Anakin Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Ahsoka Tano, Yoda, and other Star Wars Loopers.

"Blinky? Pinky? Inky?" asked Yuri, "… *Clyde* ?"

"My droids," Sayori chirped, gesturing to four R4-series astromech droids that rolled into the room, beeping greetings to their master; each one was painted a single color all-over. One was cherry-red, one was a light shade of pink, one was sky-blue, and the slowest one was a dull orange. "They're named after the ghosts from Pac-Man!"

" *You are SUCH a dork!* " Natsuki called from the kitchen, laughing.

"Hey, Sayori?" asked Monika, who had stopped in front of one photo. "Who are these girls? I don't recognize them."

"Hmm? Oh, that's Sunset and Sayaka," Sayori chirped, looking at the photo, which showed her smiling between a blue-haired girl and a woman with orange skin and red hair with yellow streaks. "Oh man, I gotta tell you about *that* Loop sometime…but for now, we've got a wedding to get to! So let's get!"

With that, Sayori clapped onto Monika's arm and yanked her off towards the cockpit.

…

About four hours later, the whole ship rattled and shook, dropped out of hyperspace and came to a dead stop. "Flies on rice!" Sayori cursed, turning in her seat and giving a hard kick to a seemingly random spot on the wall. Then she jumped out of the pilot's seat and ran out of the cockpit, yelling instructions to her droids. Monika, clutching her forehead, stumbled after her.

Then there was a loud crashing noise, followed by the sound of an unfamiliar woman screaming, then a heavy metallic thump. Then Natsuki yelled, "MONIKA! SAYORI! WE'VE GOT A…uh…just come and see!"

"All yours, Prez," said Sayori, going left at the end of the cockpit access corridor, "I'mma check the hyperdrive." So Monika went right, to the main hold, where Natsuki and Yuri had been hanging out last she had known.

She stopped short upon entering the room. "Well…judging by all the cards scattered around, I'm guessing you were putting together one heck of a castle. Who's your new friend?" she asked, gesturing to the unconscious, armored fellow lying face down in the middle of the room, on a pile of playing cards.

"We were trying to recreate St. Basil's Cathedral," said Yuri. "As for him, I've never met the gentleman."

"Me neither," said Natsuki, who was nudging him with her toe.

"So…what happened?" Monika asked.

"Well, we came to a full-stop, as I'm sure you noticed," said Natsuki, "Which, thanks to Yuri and I being total architectural badasses, didn't make our card-thedral collapse. Then there was a flash of light, and this shmuck appears and just *destroys* three hours' worth of hard work! Then he gets up, cussing his ass off, sees me and Yuri…then he screams like a ninny and passes the hell out."

"…ninny? Really, Nat? In this day and age, *ninny* ?" asked Monika. She walked over to the man's side, crouched down, and turned his head so she could see his face. Then her eyes widened…and she grinned evilly. "Girls. Cover your ears," she said, an air horn appearing in her hand.

Natsuki and Yuri clapped their hands over their ears, and Monika proceeded to blast the horn right in the man's ear.

"GWHAAAAAT THE FUCK?!" yelled the man as he jumped up and staggered away, holding his head.

"Christ, Mons, what did he ever do to you?" asked Natsuki.

"Let's just say he's someone you don't want to be stuck with in an action-survival situation," said Monika. Then she turned back to the man, staggering around and shaking his head. "Good afternoon, Dr. Freeman~" Monika greeted him sweetly. Natsuki and Yuri recognized it as Monika's 'I'm going to have so much fun fucking with your head' tone of voice.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Doctor Gordon Freeman demanded, raising his head and turning to face her at last. "You dumb, crazy…biiiiiiiii…"

He trailed off as he took in her cheerful, smiling visage. He blanched and broke out in a cold sweat, his eyes darting over to Natsuki and Yuri, then back to Monika. He gulped.

"The hell was that noise?" Sayori asked as she entered the room, behind Gordon.

Gordon whirled around, a gun appearing in his hand, and upon seeing Sayori his eyes bulged. Then his eyes rolled back and he fainted, again.

"Think he's played our game?" asked Natsuki.

"Or visited our Loop when none of us were Awake?" suggested Yuri.

"Aww, man…" Sayori groaned, covering her face with one hand.

Monika blushed and bowed her head. "Well…if he had to put up with Unawake-me, then I guess I really can't hold a grudge…damn it, I'm horrible…"

"Hey, quit your Yuri-ing," said Natsuki, giving Monika a friendly swat on the shoulder. Yuri blushed and facepalmed. "Now, let's lug this

poor guy onto a bed or something."

…

Dr. Gordon Freeman, one of the Multiverse's foremost Looping physicists *and* Cosmic Playthings, woke up in a strange bed. He didn't feel hungover, and the lights in the room weren't gouging his eyes out, so drugs and/or alcohol had not been a factor in his losing consciousness; his head wasn't aching at all, so it wasn't blunt force trauma this time, either. Before he could remember what *had* knocked him out he heard a girl's voice, soft with a hard edge. "Hey, whatever you do, *don't flip your shit* . You're safe here. None of us are going to hurt you or traumatize you, Doc. I'm Natsuki."

Gordon bolted into an upright sitting position. "Why *the fuck* are you guys Looping?!" he exclaimed, "Were all the Admins getting stoned off their asses and flipping through a playbook of Really Dumb Ideas?"

Natsuki sighed. She put out a hand, and in it appeared what looked to be wooden cudgel covered in metal studs, almost seven feet long and at least a foot and a half wide at its thickest point. "Just cuz I told you we'd be nice, doesn't mean I'll let you talk crap about me and my friends *right to my face* . If there's such a thing as a Playbook of Really Dumb Ideas, pissing me off would have to be pretty high on the list."

Gordon just shrugged, being not easily intimidated, especially by little girls. "Whatever you say, kid."

"That being said, I can't blame you for being apprehensive," said Natsuki, dropping her *kanabo* back into her subspace Pocket. "Last thing I wanted to do today was babysit some passed out jellybag dweeb. But seeing as we don't know how far you put up with our Baseline's crap before screwing the script, I was elected least likely to freak you out, so I got shafted with the crap detail. Now, do you think you can pull yourself together long enough for us to go back out with everybody? I'd kinda like to finish St. Basil's Cathedral."

Before Gordon could ask the short girl what that was supposed to mean, she was already leaving the room.

About fifteen minutes later, Gordon ran out into the main hold. "Okay, who the fuck stole my teleporter?" he asked.

"It hasn't been stolen, just temporarily confiscated," Monika spoke up. Incidentally, she was sitting at a table covered with odd-looking parts. Gordon stared at the table. Then he stared at Monika. His face turned red and blotchy.

"Whoa!" yelled a voice that made Gordon's skin crawl. "I'm feeling a *lot* of anger coming from back there. Do you guys need me?"

"We're fine, Sayori!" Monika called back.

"Meh, I'm bored anyways." Sayori's voice grew closer, "I *quintuple* - checked the astrogation this time, and Blinky has the best auto-pilot programming in *four* different universes. And we're only two more hours away from Remnant, anyways. We should be fine."

"Famous last words," Natsuki muttered as Sayori entered the room.

As soon as he saw Sayori, Gordon's face went from livid to pale. Immediately, Sayori threw one of her hands up in Gordon's direction. "Please, stay calm, Dr. Freeman. You're among friends. None of us mean you any harm. Nothing here is a threat to you. Be calm. Be at peace."

Monika, Yuri, and Natsuki felt *something* pulse through them between Sayori and Gordon. Gordon's expression evened out. He even grinned a little. Then he violently shook his head and frowned. "Hey! No funny business! I'm way too damned smart to be lulled into a false sense of security by some kind of Jedi mind trick."

"I'm not trying to lull anyone into anything," Sayori said evenly, "I just want you to understand that you're safe here. We're Loopers, right? We've moved a long, long way away from…whatever your

experience with us was like. And I'm sorry about whatever you… oh…ah…I-I'm sorry." Sayori's expression darkened and she backed up, looking down.

"What'd you see?" Gordon demanded, jumping back and putting his hands over his head.

"I didn't read your mind," Sayori said in a small voice. "I saw it in your eyes…you Replaced my friend, and you…you saw what happened to me, didn't you?"

"Oh, I saw all right! I saw what you…" Gordon abruptly shut up as the other three girls all turned *frigidly* hostile looks towards him.

"Tread very carefully with your next words, Dr. Freeman," Monika said menacingly. "Sayori is very self-conscious about…that…and we *really don't like* people who set her off. Are we clear?"

Gordon sighed. "Yeah, fine. Whatever. Now what the hell are you doing with my shit?"

"Well, we dropped out of hyperspace for no good reason *right* before you popped in," said Monika, "So I figured your teleporter messed with us. I'm guessing it uses gravitonic quantum distortions to effect spatial transpositions. And since hyperspace is more or less a compression of realspace, and substantial gravity wells in realspace can cause distortions in hyperspace, it stands to reason that a gravitonic spatial transposition across realspace could also distort hyperspace."

"Hey!" Natsuki suddenly yelled, pointing at Monika. "This is a *Star Wars* spaceship. Leave that Treknobabble malarkey off of this bird!"

Monika snickered. "Sorry. But anyways, yeah, I was just taking a look-see at this gizmo."

Gordon bristled, "Well put it back together right now, damn it, and give it back!"

"I *am* putting it back together," said Monika coolly, "And unfortunately, while I'll happily give it back to you, I'm going to have to insist that you *not* use it. You didn't just knock us out of hyperspace; your teleporter's distortion knocked us out of hyperspace hard enough to somewhat damage our hyperdrive. Using this thing from inside the ship *could* cause even more damage."

"So *stop the ship* long enough for me to get off!" said Gordon, "I sure as hell don't want to stay a minute longer on this ship than I absolutely–"

"I'm sorry!" Sayori suddenly gasped, her voice choking, "I'm sorry, Gordon, I…I'm sorry you had to see…I'm so sorry…"

Everyone turned to look at Sayori. Her miserable, self-loathing expression sent a hot pang of guilt rippling through Gordon. Guilt and shame were not things Gordon Freeman generally dealt with, but he wasn't completely heartless.

"You dumb son of a *bitch* ," Natsuki growled, her *kanabo* reappearing in hand. She took a step towards Gordon, but Yuri quickly grabbed her around the middle.

"Insensitivity, in and of itself, is not a crime deserving of capital punishment, Natsuki," the taller girl said calmly, though she was glaring daggers at the man the whole time. Even though he was a much older Looper and thus in no real danger from the Literature Club Loopers, Gordon Freeman was as nervous about being the object of a hostile group of girls' collective ire as any other man.

"Okay everyone, please, *calm down* ," said Monika, standing up from the table. "And if at all possible, let's all remember who's *really* at fault here: me. It was my fault Sayori…y'know…and it's therefore my fault that Gordon is so wary of us. I know none of us like to see our VP cry, but we can't blame *him* for being all kinds of uneasy around us. Natsuki, Yuri, please comfort Sayori. Dr. Freeman, if you would, please come with me. I'd like to have a private discussion with you."

As Gordon followed Monika into the next room, the astromech named Pinky suddenly zipped across the room and jabbed its shock-probe into Gordon's leg. The shock was by no means strong enough to penetrate the superb electrical insulation of Gordon's heavily modified HEV armor. Still, he felt the droid slam into him and saw the spark come off of its probe, and he didn't appreciate it at all. So he kicked the droid away.

Gordon followed Monika through two rooms, to the Number Two Hold, which included the ship's kitchen area. "Coffee?" Monika offered as she fixed herself a cup.

"That the strongest stuff you've got?" Gordon asked, rubbing the sides of his head.

"The strongest I'll offer, yes. As obnoxious as you are sober, I'd still rather not deal with you when you're drinking," Monika muttered.

Gordon raised an eyebrow. "You *were* Unawake that one time, weren't you? Have we met in another loop?"

"Sort of," said Monika, somewhat cagily. Gordon's other eyebrow joined the first. Monika sighed. "I've been to Black Mesa, alright? I'm not sure if you were either Unawake or some form of completely wasted. Unless you do remember the woman with the hair bun, surgical mask, and submachine gun?"

Gordon glanced off into space and scratched the side of his face thoughtfully. "Can't say I do…but I have spent whole baseline runs blitzed."

"I can't necessarily say I approve," Monika half-sighed, "But having gone through Black Mesa once, I can't say I blame you, either. I'm guessing that whole "cascade resonance" deal is annoyingly hard to prevent?"

"You bet your ass it is!" said Gordon irritably.

"Okay, so, let's just get this out of the way real quick," said Monika as she sat down at a table with her coffee. "I'm sorry for the air horn. I could make an excuse, but I won't. You and I have dealt with each other's Baselines, so I figure we're even. More or less. You can't really be "even" in situations like these, I suppose, but I'm not really one for pissing contests…as concerns misery and self-pity, at least."

"…alright, fine, whatever," grumbled Gordon as he started fixing his own cup of coffee.

"Well, I can tell you haven't changed a whole lot as a person in the Loops, assuming that was the Unawake you," Monika said frankly.

"Oh, no, by all means, tell me what you *really* think," Gordon sneered as he took a seat on the other side of the table.

"I think you're an obnoxious ass who's even *less* deserving of being an Anchor than I," Monika continued calmly. " *If* that was–"

"Yes!" Gordon suddenly snapped, "Fine, I admit it! That's exactly what I'm like. Okay?"

"Okay, good," said Monika cheerfully, giving a sigh of relief. Gordon's irritable flush receded and he cocked his head curiously. "Now I know it's okay for me to feel bad about the air horn, and I don't have to rescind my apology."

Now Gordon frowned. "Uh…okay? I…you're *happy* that you fucked up and don't have to apologize for it?"

Monika took a long drink from her coffee. "I did a…well, a few different horrible things, a long time ago. On occasion, I find it regrettably necessary to do something I'd rather not. Over these many years of looping, I've apologized many times. For many things. Usually to my friends. Sometimes to other people. And more than once, I've met a Looper who had to suffer our Baseline's insanity and, despite the overall custom of Loopers not judging one another for their Unawake actions, I have felt compelled to apologize to them

for that. And…well…" Monika started laughing, a perfectly normal, girlish laugh that Gordon nonetheless found deeply disturbing. "Well, people often find it hard to believe this about me, but…well, I'm really not a humble person. I apologize a lot because it's the right thing to do, I feel, but I *hate* doing it, all the same. It…pricks at me. The only thing I hate more than apologizing is finding out the apology wasn't necessary. Because then I have to take it back, because just as my sense of justice compels me to apologize for my wrongdoings, my sense of pride demands that I take back apologies that I didn't have to give in the first place. My ego can really tear itself apart over that kind of thing. Apologizing is humbling, but taking it back is outright *humiliating* ."

Gordon rubbed his head and groaned, "You talk a lot, kid."

"…yeah, I guess I do," Monika agreed, staring into her cup. Then a device appeared in her hand, which she used to create a blue circular portal in the air. "Well, there's your ride to Remnant. See you there, I suppose."

"Huh. That's one of Rick Sanchez's portal gun's," Gordon observed, "And historically speaking, he isn't renowned for his sense of charity. How'd you–"

"My interactions with other Loopers are my business and my business only," Monika stated flatly, putting the portal gun back in her Pocket.

"Fair enough," Gordon conceded. "So why didn't you whip this out back there?"

"I…would rather my friends weren't aware of my friendships with *certain* Loopers, and as you noted that is a very visually distinct device," Monika admitted, glancing aside and taking a sip of her coffee. "Rick has a reputation, as I'm sure you know–"

"So long, boring story short, you don't want your buddies knowing you're messing around with a cynical, nihilistic jackass," Gordon

surmised with a smirk.

Monika only rolled her eyes. "My relationship–and I only use that word because 'friendship' is a little too strong–is of a *purely* intellectual nature. Even if it weren't, right now I'm abstaining from romantic or sexual relations with *anyone* . And even if I weren't, Rick's not my type. He and I just happen to have somewhat similar worldviews and a common interest in making physics our plaything. He's not the nicest man I've met in the Multiverse, but he's someone I can respect."

"But not enough that you want your friends to know about him," Gordon pointed out.

Monika groaned and lowered her head. "It's not that…look, he's a well-known nihilist. I don't want them to think that I'm backsliding, or anything."

"Backslide?" Gordon frowned and looked thoughtful for a moment. Then his eyes widened. "You had something to do with Sayori's suicide," he said. It wasn't by any means a question. Monika simply nodded.

"Like I said, I've done a lot of horrible things. Things I regret. I *hate* feeling regret, and I hate telling them how sorry I am, even though I mean it." Monika abruptly stood up and started out of the room. "And I'm done talking about this. See you at the wedding, Dr. Freeman. I'll make sure your gadget is fully reassembled by then. I mean, if you really want to, you can come out and gather the pieces yourself, but I can't promise Natsuki won't clobber you."

"Hey, you know what? I've already had enough of this ship and everyone on it. No offense," Gordon replied.

"None taken," Monika assured him, stopping at the doorway. "And, not that you owe me anything, but if I could ask a favor of you…not for myself, but for the person most precious to me…"

"Like what?" Gordon asked, sounding half-irritated and half-curious. He already had a strong suspicion what it would be, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't feel a little bad about indirectly causing her to cry. She was a sweet kid. She was sincerely *nice* , which was more than he could say for a lot of people he had met across the Multiverse.

"From what I understand, this loop will last a few months. We'll be on Remnant for a while. I would appreciate it if, at some point…it would mean a lot to me if you could find time to reach out to Sayori, at some point. Remind her that she shouldn't beat herself up over our horror-show of a Baseline. That's all. See you later, Doctor." With that, she left. A moment later, Gordon Freeman stepped through the portal, which closed behind him.

…

A few hours later, the *Eternal Sunshine* landed a few miles outside of Vale. They would have landed closer, or even somewhere in town, but Sayori had never added any kind of stealth module to the ship, and Monika wasn't sure they could pass it off as a strangely-designed airship. As it happened, despite them choosing an almost totally random landing spot, there was someone waiting for them there.

They were greeted by a familiar ginger-haired gynoid. "Salutations, Monika, Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki. It's wonderful to see you all again," said Penny with a (somewhat twitchy) smile.

The girls each gave Penny a hug. "Good to see you too, Penny," said Monika. "How'd you know we were going to land here?"

"I sent an observer drone into Remnant's upper atmosphere, to keep me appraised of incoming spacecraft," replied Penny. "Besides you, the Reds and Blues have also coming by ship." Her eyes unfocused as she stared miles deeply into the middle distance, before snapping back to the conversation, "As is a young Looper named Edison Trent."

"So, how much time do we have to get prepped for the big event?" asked Yuri.

"Oh, the actual wedding won't be for a few months yet," said Penny, "We still have quite a bit of prep-work–"

Then Natsuki shoved Monika to the side and stood at attention in front of Penny, saluting and everything. "Literature Club's Official Caterer Natsuki, reporting for duty! Ready and willing to *put my heart and soul* into helping with all matters confectionary! Point me to whoever's in charge of baking the cakes, ma'am!"

Yuri stepped up next to Natsuki, "I'm also willing to lend aid to the preparations; I know Remnant has a relatively high population of Loopers, but I imagine an event of this magnitude is still an all-hands-on-deck scenario. Not to brag, but aesthetics, interior design, and other atmospheric matters are a specialty of mine."

Sayori also stepped up, "We may be guests, but Blake is an honorary club member and this is her Big Day! Er, I mean, it's going to be. Soon-ish. I don't really know how I can be helpful…heh-heh… but I'll do whatever I can to help out!"

"Basically, what they said," said Monika, getting back up and dusting herself off with a pointed glare aimed at Natsuki. "Guests though we may be, you can consider we of the Looping Literature Club at your disposal."

Penny smiled at them all. "Well, in that case, you'll all want to talk to Weiss. She's the Organizer for the wedding, after all. But first, we have dedicated lodgings set up for off-world Loopers. You still have your Scrolls?" she asked, pulling out her own.

Monika nodded and Unpocketed a Scroll, and Penny sent her a set of co-ordinates. "You can't miss it," said Penny, "It's a…you know what? I'll let it be a surprise. Trust me, you'll *know* it when you see it."

"Welp, back on the *Sunshine* I guess," said Monika, as the four of them turned back to their ship.

Scene 2: Fear of God(ess).

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(Sailor Moon)

(By Masterweaver)

"Excuse me, Weiss!" Monika called as she walked up. "You're organizing all this, right? Me and the club are ready to..."

She trailed off as Weiss, and more importantly the person next to her, turned to look at them. The other girl had a short shoes and long legs. She wore a simple green skirt and pink shirt under a casually open jacket. Her long hair was blonde, with a red bow atop her head. And nothing was threatening about her friendly features, not even the blue eyes that zeroed in on her specifically with a bright smile.

But the girls didn't live with Natsuki without learning about the anime classics. And a looper didn't live in Yggdrasil without hearing about the original seven loops.

"...help," Monika finished with a squeak.

"That's quite thoughtful of you, thank you," Weiss said. "Oh, Monika, this is Minako Aino, of the Sailor Moon loops."

"H-h-hii *iiii* ii..." The club president gave a weak wave and a smile.

"Minako, these are Monika, Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki, of the Doki Doki Literature club."

"Hey there!" said the girl cheerfully. "How are you doing?"

"Ju-just Moni-FINE!" Monika clasped her hands behind her back. "We're, we're doing fine, miss Aino-megamisama."

"Miss Aino-megamisama?" Natsuki said dryly. "That's a-"

Monika quickly sidestepped in front of her. "Incredibly appropriate title!"

Minako chuckled. "What, because I'm a love goddess?"

"Yes!" Monika agreed, nodding quickly. "That. And other, other things. Yes."

"Mmmhmm." Minako's eyes roved over to a small clearing. "Saw a modified Millennium Falcon land over there, was that yours?"

"Oh, yes," Sayori said with a smile. "The Eternal Sunshine. We were on Earth when we Woke Up and we didn't want to bother Penny, so-"

"You know, you could have just called us up," Minako said casually. "Me and the other Senshi. We're all Awake this loop."

"Really?" Monika said, her smile growing desperately broad. "All of you?"

"Yep. A quick sailor teleport could have gotten you here in a second."

"Well, you know, it was a club bonding experience," Yuri said.

"YES. That!" Monika nodded. "That is what it was. Friendship. Mutually friendly friendship."

"Always important," Minako said with a smile. "Hey, maybe we can talk after the wedding."

"I / I wouldn't want to be a bother miss Aino-megamisama," Monika said in a polite voice that was three octaves higher.

"Nonsense, it'll be great!" The girl flashed a peace sign and walked off. "I'll leave you with Weiss! Yoiichinichiwo!"

"Anata mo, Sērā Vīnasu!" Natsuki waved as she walked off, before turning to Monika. "What was that, Prez? You look like you're going to have a breakdown."

Monika stood very still, her face frozen in a rictus grin as she made a whining squeak.

"Oh shit-you actually are going to have a breakdown." Natsuki grabbed Monika's shoulders. "Monika, breathe. Breathe, it's okay. It's-Girls, help?"

Yuri rushed over. "Monika, it's alright. Minako won't hurt you."

"You... you're right," Monika said with a nod. "Maybe she's never played the game, maybe, maybe she doesn't know about our baseline, right?"

Sayori coughed. "Um. Actually... with my force sensitivity... I'm pretty sure she recognized you when she turned around."

Monika stopped breathing for all of five seconds.

Then Weiss stepped up, putting a pair of fingers to her forehead. Instantly, Monika went lax, almost falling into Natsuki and Yuri's arms.

"...oooooh. Wow. Look aathasky, esobluuuuu..."

"Rather intense burst of Force Calm there," Sayori said flatly.

"Quite a bit of guilt-induced terror," Weiss countered.

"Saaaaaaaaayori. Ri, ri ri." Monika giggled. "Ri, yo, sa."

"What?" Natsuki asked, trying to ignore the girl nuzzling her shoulders. "What's Sailor Venus got to do with that?"

Weiss started counting off on her fingers. "Original seven, well known love goddess, friends with an expert on the mechanics of the soul, her name is an anagram of Monika's..."

"Riri bossss, caushethink. Kaywordssay... Nats. Nats, you have soft fluffies."

Weiss shook her head. "Given what went down in your four's baseline, I suspect she was expecting some form of retribution."

"That..." Yuri sighed. "That actually makes sense. Come on, let's get the president to bed. Weiss, um, can you get us some sort of job memo by tomorrow? We really do want to help."

"~Lisalwork to gefer!~" Monika sang, raising a finger. "~Lisalwork a loooot...~"

"I'll be more than ready, I assure you."

Scene 3: Ask The Experts

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(Sailor Moon)

(By me)

"Knock, knock-knock-knock-knock, knock-knock!"

"…did you just vocalize Two Bits?" asked Taiyang Xiao Long as he opened the door to his house.

Standing on the other side was a cartoonishly oversized picnic basket. Tai could smell the cookies hidden within. "Yeah, hands were full. May I come in, Mr. Xiao Long?" asked Sayori's voice from behind the basket.

"Ha, as if I could turn away a guest bearing cookies. C'mon in, kid, make yourself at home," said Tai, standing aside.

"Thanks," said Sayori, rushing inside and setting down the huge basket on the nearest available surface, which was a couch in the living room. Wiping off her forehead with the back of her hand, Sayori flopped down on the couch. "So, how's Yang holding up?"

"Well, we all know how anxious she is, but she's holding up a strong front for now," explained Tai, returning to his chair and picking up a newspaper, like the quintessential dad that he was. "Right now,

Ruby, Cinder and one of the other visiting Loopers are entertaining her in her room. Some racing game."

"Thought I sensed Senpai on me way in," Sayori murmured. "Who's the other Looper?"

"The girl from that team of sailor superheroes, Mina Venus or something."

Sayori sat bolt-upright. "Minako's here? Awesome, I can catch two birds with one worm."

"Neat…wait, what?" asked Tai, furrowing his brow in confusion.

"I like collecting malaphors," Sayori explained as she hopped back up to her feet and levitated her stupid-sized basket of cookies. "They're my thing, like Yang with her paronomasias."

"You mean her puns?"

"In a sense, that's exactly what I just said," said Sayori with a smile as she headed for the stairs, basket floating along behind her.

Yang's door was open, and as Sayori poked her head in Minako was cheering her own victory while Yang was swearing vengeance. Cinder was lounging under the window with a scroll–the old paper kind, not the Remnant kind–and Ruby…was already glomped onto Sayori's floating basket. "Somnus," Cinder greeted without looking up.

"Heya Cognitia. Whatcha reading?" Sayori asked, directing her basket and its attached Ruby to settle down on Yang's bed.

"Some Ancient Eqyptian literotica Emerald picked up from the Lost Library of Alexandria," said Cinder.

"Neato," said Sayori, "You've got the same neutral smut-reading expression Yuri has." She sat down on the other side of the basket, which Ruby was already blissfully tearing into.

"I wouldn't call this 'smut' so much as *thoroughly* descriptive romance. They didn't just put *everything* written on papyrus in the Great Alexandrian Library, you know."

Sayori shrugged. "So it's fancy smut. Smut is smut. But anyways, I suck at seguing from small-talk to serious-talk, so I'm just going to come right out and say it; I need some advice on the subject of… romance."

Sayori blinked, and suddenly Ruby, Yang, and Minako were all crowding around her. Cinder deigned to look away from her scroll and regarded the younger Sith with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah. This is about the reaction I expected," said Sayori. "Well, I wasn't expecting Minako to be here when I came over, but I won't spit in a gift love goddess's eyes."

"…what?" asked Minako.

"She likes malaphors," said Cinder. "She's also a goofball weirdo. Pinkie Pie took her on as her apprentice for a reason."

"Ah," said Minako in tones of enlightenment.

"Well, what is it?!" squeaked Ruby, "Come on, quit leaving us in suspense!"

"Okay…so, there's this friend that I'd like to start dating–" Sayori began.

" *OhmygodsisitMonika?!* " Ruby squealed.

Sayori sighed. "Yeah…it's Monika."

Cinder raised her other eyebrow and sat up, while Minako and Yang exchanged worried looks. Ruby was grinning from ear to ear and making some kind of high-pitched keening noise.

"The problem, of course, is that Monika is stubborn as all get-out," Sayori huffed, glaring at her bangs. "Every time I try to broach the subject, she gets evasive. She'll tell me she has more important things to focus on, or she'll insist that she doesn't *need* romance in her life right now. And I know aromantics are a thing but I also know that Monika isn't one of them. She's every bit as lovesick as I am but most of the time she wants to pretend she isn't. And it isn't healthy, damn it! I just don't know how to make her see reason."

"Just tell her how you feel!" said Ruby, "If you're completely direct in your approach there's no way she can just ignore it."

"I've considered that angle, but I don't want to feel like I'm guilt-tripping her or making this all about me," Sayori explained as she pulled a mint cookie out of her basket and started nibbling on it.

"Are you *sure* this is a good idea?" Yang asked in a concerned tone. "I mean…"

Sayori rolled her eyes. "Yeah, trust me, I know better than anyone else possibly could what Monika is like as a person. The good, the bad, and the ugly. And despite my outwardly sanguine disposition, I'm not some naïve child. I realize Monika still has troubling tendencies, but she's also relentless in her quest for redemption. And as much fun as the four of us have as friends, Monika's still achingly lonely in a way that mere friendship, or even bestfriendship, alone can't satisfy. She *needs* someone she can be vulnerable around. Someone who can help her drop her guard. She's been pretending for thousands of thousands of loops that she's fine and that the only thing she cares about is making the rest of us happy but…that kind of attitude is horribly self-destructive. Again, I know that better than most. In fact, it's kind of scary that she's…well, she's acting like I used to. Like her own problems are trivial and don't matter. And I know that love doesn't actually fix everything, but I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be the worst place to start."

"You really care for her a lot, don't you?" Minako asked, her blue eyes shining as she intensely analyzed Sayori's expression.

Sayori gave the Sailor Senshi a hard look. "I know you and I don't really know each other, ma'am, but your knee-jerk reaction to seeing Monika the other day didn't escape my empathic senses. I've got a pretty good idea of what you think of her. And you know what? You're not wrong. Monika did awful things, and you're entitled to feel the way you feel about them. But she's not a monster. She's not even a sociopath. I've *felt* her toss and turn in her bed at night, her guilt tearing at her inside. She hates herself more than any of us *could* hate her, if we still did. And make no mistake, when all of this Looping business first started for us I was very angry at her. So angry I didn't know how to express it, so I did what I always do and pretended everything was okay. I've never told Monika what I thought of her, way back then, because since my very first loop she's done nothing but bend over backwards for us. She earned my friendship back, and it's not much of an exaggeration to say that I love her more than I love myself…sometimes. Which is why I desperately want to see her happy, or at least a little bit less in pain."

"Well damn," muttered Yang, wiping something out of her eye. She gave Sayori a grin. "I'm sold. You should go for it, kid."

"But how?!" Sayori groaned, flopping backwards on the bed. "She's totally incontinent on this issue."

"…I *really* hope you meant 'intransigent'," said Minako, sounding a little disgusted.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Sayori said in an absent tone.

"That's another thing she likes doing," said Cinder.

"Except *that* quirk is from Baseline. Sort of," Sayori added with a goofy grin. Then she went back to frowning. She blew at her bangs.

Minako seemed thoughtful, chewing on her lower lip. At length, she said, "Well…maybe she's just not interested?" she hedged.

"Of course she's interested in love," Sayori snorted, "It's half…well, maybe less than half, but at *least* a fifth of the reason she lost her mind in the first place. Either way, like I said I know what aromanticism is but it *doesn't* apply to Monika. She's as lonesome as I am, sometimes moreso."

Ruby sighed, "Yeah…but…Minako's got a point. She might not be willing to see *you* as more than a friend."

Sayori snorted again, but this time it was closer to a laugh. "What are you talking about? We're already more like sisters than like friends. I might even go as far as to say that she's the Weiss to my Ruby!"

"Um…I'm not sure I'm following you anymore," said Ruby. Yang and Minako were exchanging much more worried looks now, and while Cinder's expression was perfectly composed and placid, on the inside she was dying from holding in her laughter.

"I mean, I'd just outright call her my bestest best friend if it weren't for Hiroaka…I mean, if he never comes back and starts Looping I guess she is, functionally at least, my bestest best friend…but that's just a whole complicated thing. Either way, we all know that I'm *her* bestest best friend, and as her bestest best friend *and* her second-in-command I absolutely refuse to let her languish in her lovesickness! I'll find *someone* for Monika even if I have to scour all of Yggdrasil!" she vowed, jumping up and balancing on top of her basket, shaking a fist at the heavens.

"…so, just so we're all on the same page…you *weren't* talking about having a crush on Monika?" asked Ruby.

At first, Sayori didn't react at all. Then she made a puzzled frown, as if *just* now catching on that someone had said something off. Then her expression became one of dawning horror. "Wait, you… *oh gods NO!* Nonononononono, HELL no, no way…oh, I need some air," Sayori groaned, looking a little green around the mouth. She jumped over to the window–Cinder quickly scooting aside to avoid getting bowled

over–and threw it open. "Why, in a *bazillion* years, would you ever think that I…" Sayori trailed off, mentally rewinding and going over exactly what she had said to begin with. Then she facepalmed, hard. "Okay. When I said I had a friend *that* I would like to start dating, I meant I would like *her* to start dating, not that I wanted to date *her* . That's why I said I had a friend *that* I'd like to start dating, rather than a friend *whom* I'd like to start dating. Still, I acknowledge that this was all due to poor wording on my part."

"No dip," Yang muttered.

"And for the record, not that I thought it really needed to be put into words, but Monika and I are definitely one of the top twenty couples that should *never ever never happen, ever* ," Sayori said emphatically. "That's like…okay, I'm not going to compare it to Tauradonna, because that's way worse, but that'd be like if *Amber* started Looping and developed feeling for *Cinder* . No offense, Senpai."

"None taken," Cinder replied immediately.

"I thought you said–" Minako started.

"I've forgiven her, yes, and she's one of my best friends, but I can't ever *forget* what happened," Sayori insisted, "I may be a little bit desperate myself, but I'll never be desperate enough to make out with the woman that made me dance the hemp fandango!" She frowned, then snapped, "Damn it, I didn't mangle that metaphor." Shaking her head, she added, "Also, I'm straight. I know a lot of Loopers gradually evolve into pansexuals out of sheer boredom, but at least for now I'm still very much comfortable with my boring heterosexuality. Bizarre loops where I Wake Up in Yuri's bed notwithstanding."

"Aww, but you'd be so cu–"

" *No* , Ruby, no we wouldn't," Sayori snapped, "There will never, ever, be anything okay about that image."

"Wait, don't your friends ship the two of you?" Yang spoke up, "I'm pretty sure I remember hearing them talk about it."

"Yes, and Monika and I let them because we hope that in the course of trying to get us together they might realize their own massive mutual crush on each other," Sayori groaned, "Which, I'll admit, is kind of a long game, but so far none of our efforts to get them to confess to each other have panned out so it's better than nothing."

"…you four have a really weird group dynamic," Minako observed.

"Yes. Yes we do. That's how you can tell we're family," Sayori replied, the corners of her mouth quirking.

"So…you came her for advice on how to convince the person you claim to know better than anyone else that she should start dating?" Minako asked in summary.

"Well, you're a love goddess, Ruby's a matchmaking expert, Cinder's got a much more manipulative personality than I do so I guess she could point out some angle I haven't thought of," explained Sayori, "And Yang's…very successful, romantically?" she hedged.

"Well, that last bit is certainly true. We wouldn't all be sharing this loop if that weren't the case," Cinder remarked wryly.

"Ayyy," said Yang, throwing up her thumbs.

"Also, I've been meaning to talk to Venus here about 'The Monika Thing', so two stones in a bush and all that," Sayori added.

"Is it weird that her…malaphors?…are starting to make sense to me?" asked Ruby.

"I think people should use them more often. On purpose, that is; a lot of malaphors are accidental. They make conversations a lot more fun! They're like the mystery-flavored suckers of linguistics," Sayori chirped.

"Okay, what kind of idiom was *that* ?" asked Minako.

"A Sayori-ism," quipped Cinder.

"So any suggestions?" asked Sayori. She turned to Yang, "How'd you and Blake get together? She seems like the sort who would have been a tough safe to crack."

Yang snorted. "Actually, she was the one that made a move on me. After I'd given her a heartwarming spiel about how I didn't blame her for her evil stalker dismembering me, but still. She was the one that launched the S.S. Bumblebee."

"Oh…Ruby?"

"Despite the shift in context, I stand by my original assessment," replied the Anchor, "Corner Monika and spill your guts to her. Make her understand how worried you are about this. It's not guilt-tripping or manipulation if you're just telling her how worried you are and how much you want her to find happiness."

"That's sound advice in general, but her guilt complex might complicate things," Minako observed, "I'd have to get to know Monika better before I could offer any truly helpful advice. And to do that, she'd have to stop hyperventilating around me."

"Yeah, that's next on my to-do list," said Sayori. She turned to Cinder, who had taken a seat on the bed and helped herself to a macaroon. "Senpai?"

"Why do you keep calling *her* that?" Minako asked curiously.

"She's pseudo-Japanese and a younger Looping Sith Lady," Cinder explained. "Actually, I think she started the Senpai thing just to annoy Emerald."

"She's a rival of Monika's, so I'm just a little bit obligated to harmlessly pick on her," Sayori reasoned, "And also it's funny."

"Pseudo-Japanese?" asked Minako.

"Baseline, I'm a video game character that was made by Americans, so even though my name is Japanese-ish–it's not even a real Japanese name, it's a mash-up of two Japanese names the creator liked–I'm not really a Japanese person."

"Huh."

"So do you have any ideas, Cinder?" Sayori asked.

Cinder shrugged, "Well, if it were me, I'd just put Monika in tempting situations until her own sexual tension makes her crack. No one's resolve is unbreakable. And you've got the Force on your side, you can always use it to erode her willpower. Once you get her to cave on the physical side of things, it's only a matter of time before she gives up avoiding the emotional part. Assuming, of course, that you're right about her secretly longing for romance."

Sayori groaned, "You are *sooooo* …" she suddenly went silent. She blinked, and then her eyes widened.

"…I'm not liking what I'm sensing over here, Somnus," said Cinder cagily. "Because I'm not sensing anything. The only time you close yourself off is when you're actively trying to scheme. And, no offense Young One, but your "schemes" tend to be somewhat…haphazard at best."

Sayori stood up. "Cinder, you've given me a lot to think about," Sayori said in a flat, controlled tone of voice. "And I appreciate the rest of you girls' contributions. Please, enjoy the rest of the cookies. Have a good day."

She left the room, and the house, without another word.

Scene 4: A Humble Request.

(DDLC)/(RWBY)

(By me)

As crowded a place as it was, Kuo Kuana wasn't a town you would necessarily describe as 'quiet'. Sure, there was no "big city hustle and bustle", but the sheer density of the local populace ensured a respectable ambient noise level. However, this noise level was also fairly consistent. From the beginning to the end of the work day, there was a fairly uniform background of hubbub. A hubbub that didn't entirely fade away after dusk, but did drop noticeably as there weren't quite as many nocturnal Faunus as there were diurnal. All in all, sudden disruptive up-spikes in noise, while not being unheard of, were pretty irregular.

So *everyone* noticed the pair of human girls on the motorcycle (a purple Kawasaki Ninja H2R, to be specific) that roared up from the beach and tore down the main street towards the Belladonna house. Eyewitness accounts would later swear on their deity of choice that they had seen the motorcycle driving *across the ocean* . Driving the bike was a woman wearing purple, with a long, purple ponytail streaming out of an equally purple helmet. Sitting behind her was a shorter woman wearing pink.

The driver hit the brakes and popped a stoppie right in front of the steps leading up to imposing manor. As they had practiced, the shorter girl stood up and sprang off of the bike as the rear end lifted, catapulting her right to the door. Just as Kali Belladonna was stepping outside to see what that infernal roaring had been. The Faunus matron jumped back when the small, pink-haired human superhero-landed right in front of her.

Natsuki stood up with a grin and removed her helmet. "Heya, Missus B. Is Blake here?" she asked.

"Yes, she is," Kali affirmed, smiling, "And she's getting pretty stir-crazy, so I'm sure she would appreciate a visitor." She stepped to the side and beckoned Natsuki to enter.

Natsuki called back over her shoulder, "Thanks for the lift, Yuri!"

Yuri, her face still hidden by the helmet, raised two fingers in a silent salute before kickstarting her bike and taking off back towards the sea.

"Was that *your* girlfriend, Natsuki?" Kali asked her as she entered.

"Just because I was riding bitch on her bike doesn't make me her… girlfriend…no, we're not dating. Or anything remotely similar," Natsuki grumbled, faintly blushing.

"Ah. Pardon my mistake," Kali said in a knowing tone. Natsuki just rolled her eyes, but said nothing further. She didn't feel like giving Kali a hard time. She was cool people.

Kali led Natsuki to a table where Blake and Ilia appeared to be playing Go Fish. No, wait, they were throwing cards down into a pile. War, maybe? Either way, they both looked bored as hell. So Natsuki felt no qualms about interrupting their game. "Heya, Blakey. Sup?" Natsuki greeted as she plopped herself down at the table.

Blake smiled at her, "Hey, Natsuki. You here on wedding business, or is this a social call?"

"Well I don't have anything important to do today, so I've got no problem hanging out for the day. But I do have one, kind of super-important wedding-related thing to talk to you about…and kind of personal, too."

Blake sat up straighter, her ears twitching. Natsuki's posture was apprehensive. Vulnerable, even. That was unusual. Like Yang, Blake knew, Natsuki liked to maintain a strong front at all times. Blake wouldn't call her "Strength", though. She wasn't that much like Yang. She was…Blake didn't want to say she was *weak* on the inside…if she had to pick a word to sum up Natsuki, she'd have to go with..."feisty" was a good one.

Sensing personal feelsy stuff coming up, Ilia stood up and said, "'Scuse me, gotta go…powder my…freckles?" Then she slipped out

of the room with ninja- *like* -tread.

"So what's on your mind?" asked Blake, folding her arms on the table and leaning forward.

Natsuki took a deep breath, and she started ticking off her fingers, "I've been a rat, I've been a bat, I've been a *boy* , I've been a pony, I've been a Majin, I've been a Magical Girl, I've been an oni…but more than all of the above put together, I've been some kind of cat. I've been a housecat, I've been all kinds of wild cats, I've been all different kinds of catgirl about a thousand times. And last time I was on Remnant, I was a Faunus. At this point, I think I may as well embrace the fact that I'm…I don't know, at least half-catgirl, in the Loops. I mean, even way back before I started Looping I always thought of cats as my spirit animal or whatever…aw crap, I'm rambling!" Natsuki groaned, facepalming.

"Relax," Blake said gently, "Just tell me what's on your mind."

Natsuki took another breath. "Sorry. I'm making this awkward. It's just…in some worlds, being a catgirl or some other kind of non-human isn't a big deal. It's like, "oh, hey, a magical creature. Neat." And if Remnant was one of those worlds, I wouldn't be so worked up about this. But on this world being a Faunus *is* a big deal, and you're not just some random person either. You're our friend, and an honorary club member, and I don't…I don't want to offend you, or anything. So, I just wanted to ask you if you'd be okay with me…" Natsuki's voice suddenly dropped and she trailed away into a mumble too low for Blake to hear.

"I'm sorry, what? I didn't catch that," she told the shorter girl.

Natsuki blushed. "Iwannatendyorwedingasafaunus…" she quickly mumbled.

"Huh? What was–"

"I want to attend your wedding as a Faunus!" Natsuki said in a strangled shout, as if trying to shush herself. Then her whole face turned beet red and she squeaked, "Pretty please?"

Blake blinked. "You…want to attend my wedding as a Faunus?"

Apparently no longer trusting her voice, Natsuki rapidly bobbed her head up and down. Natsuki's whole body seemed to flicker, and then her hands were replaced by fluffy pink cat paws. Blake glanced down at them, and blinked again. "You kept an imprint of your Faunus body? After just one loop?"

Natsuki leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "Like I said, I've been a ton of different kinds of catgirls. Apparently because I have a cat-like personality, the first syllable of my name rhymes with "cat", and ***the Multiverse is run by a stupid tree that's addicted to shitty puns!*** " Natsuki said, suddenly shouting the last part and death-glaring at the ceiling. She huffed and blew at her bangs. "But it's whatever, I guess. I put up with it. Not like I've got much choice. I'm not even going to try guessing how many cat loops the Tree has put *you* through."

"But you *liked* being a Faunus?" Blake asked, feeling slightly confused.

"Heck yeah!" said Natsuki, lifting her arms and stretching them. "Faunus are *cool* . They're not *just* people with animal bits tacked on. Like I said, in this world being a Faunus matters. Faunus get shit on by humans for being different, like all the time. Before I started Looping, I got picked on for being different too. And that's part of what being a Faunus is. Like Monika would say, that's the reality they have to live in. And that impacts the kind of people they are. That kind of reality creates no-fucks-giving, no-shit-taking badasses like you, and your parents, and Ilia, and Velvet, and S…hmm. I mean, Sun is *cool* and all, but I don't know if he meets my personal criteria for 'badass'. But that's beside the point. You get what I'm getting at, right?"

"I think so," said Blake thoughtfully, glancing away into the middle distance. "You're more or less indifferent to 'normal' catgirls, because there isn't much substance to them beyond having some feline features. Faunus, on the other hand, are personally affected by their difference from humans, and you respect them for the strength of character this gives them. You feel like you have an affinity with us."

A half-carved block of wood appeared on the table in front of Natsuki, which she picked up and started etching into with her claws. "Pretty much, yeah. Like I said, part of my backstory–which isn't an actual past so much as it is programming from my Baseline–is that my father and my classmates judged me for…well, for being a manga geek, basically. And for liking things that they wrote off as 'childish' or 'cute'. No one takes you seriously when you're 'just a cute, little kid'. And that stuff usually follows me into other loops, naturally." Her expression darkened, and she started tearing bigger divots out of the wood.

"Our last loop here," she continued, "I was the only Faunus in the village I grew up in, because my mom fucked off when I was little and left me with a racist asshole. Apparently she was one of those Faunus that could easily pass for human. Me, not so much, which was probably why she ditched me. And as is usual for me, my dad was cruel and…anyways, one night he tried to *declaw* me, so I messed him up, so he kicked me out. I became the village beggar. But Sayori and Yuri were there for me, of course." Natsuki gave a dark chuckle, "I remember Monika and I didn't get along at first, because she was Atlesian and she was used to looking down on people like me. But Sayori, miracle worker that she is, warmed us up to each other. Then our village got hit by the Grimm. I was a scrawny little malnourished Faunus girl with no combat training. But I kept up with the others and we got out of there safe. No one had to carry my weight, you know? And that was *before* we all Woke Up. So all that badass was Faunus-Natsuki. Faunsuki, if you will. I don't think I've ever been more proud of an Unawake-me." By now Natsuki had forced a smile on her face. All that was left of her wood block was shreds, which she put back in her Pocket.

"So…what you're telling me is that in your last loop here, you were proud to be a Faunus," Blake surmised with a soft smile.

"Pretty much," Natsuki confirmed, scratching the side of her face. "I wanted to make sure it was okay with you, first. I want you to understand that I don't take this lightly."

Blake smiled and ruffled Natsuki's hair, causing her to shrink in on herself and let out a startled squeak. "As long as your motivation comes from respect for the Faunus and pride in being associated with us, I don't mind. I'm actually a little flattered that you think so highly of being a Faunus. It's sweet of you. Reminds me of how I feel about being an adopted Uchiha."

"I have no idea how you feel comfortable around that guy," Natsuki said with a sigh. "I mean, he's really cool and all but he is *scary* . I met him once, a couple hundred years ago, and I've still got the heeby-jeebies."

"Sasuke *is* pretty intense," Blake conceded. "He just takes getting used to is all. And you might have caught him on a bad loop." She stood up and stretched herself out. "I'm going to make some tea, y–"

"Yes please!" exclaimed Natsuki, jumping back up to her feet.

…

Natsuki followed Blake into the kitchen, where Kali appeared to be heating something in a small saucepan. While Blake fetched the tea set from the cupboards, Natsuki sidled up next to Kali. "Whatcha cookin', good-lookin'?" she asked as she peeked in the pan. "Wait, is that milk?"

"It is," Kali confirmed, "The old sweet tooth is itching, so I'm making some basundi. You want some, Natsuki?"

"It'll be a cold day in heck when I turn down a sweet treat, ma'am," Natsuki replied with a grin.

"I'll have some too, Mom," Blake spoke up as she filled the tea kettle with water.

"What happened to your hands?!" asked Ilia's voice from somewhere above. Natsuki looked up, and found her sitting on top of the refrigerator, right on the edge. Because of course she was.

"My…oh, yeah. Switched 'em out of for my Faunus paws," said Natsuki, holding up her paws and wiggling her fingers.

Ilia just stared at her. Natsuki stared back. After a moment, the awkward silence was broken by the sound of crickets chirping. Which was followed by Blake speaking up, trying not to laugh, "Mom, knock it off." The chirping dropped off, replaced by Kali snickering.

"Why?" Ilia finally asked.

"Why what?" Natsuki asked back, "Why is my Faunus trait cat paws?" She shrugged, "Hell if I know, I didn't pick 'em. The Tree does what the Tree does, y'know?"

"No, why did you change your hands into paws?" Ilia asked.

"Because they're my–oh, right, you weren't in the room. I'm going to the wedding as Faunus-me," Natsuki explained, folding her paws behind her head.

"No, I heard you ask about that," said Ilia, "I mean why–"

"Hey, if we're going to make a whole conversation out of this, could you come down here please? My neck's getting stiff."

"Oh, sorry." Ilia slipped down to the floor, and wasted no time picking back up on her train of thought. "Why would you trade *hands* for *paws* ? That's kind of a step down in terms of usefulness, isn't it?"

Natsuki frowned and cocked her head. "You mean…why not go with cat ears, or a tail, so I can keep my thumbs?" she asked.

"Yeah. Thumbs are pretty useful, you know," Ilia observed.

"You make a fair point," Natsuki admitted, "But the paws are what made me Faunus-Natsuki. Any other cat trait would just make me Catsuki. And while being Catsuki does make napping a lot more enjoyable…somehow…it's also just Yggdrasil having pun at my expense yet again. Catsuki is a *joke* . Faunsuki, on the other paw, was a *boss* ."

"I…I…ah…Blake, can you translate that?" Ilia asked, glancing over at her adopted sister.

Blake, waiting for her water to boil, was sitting cross-legged on the counter with a book in hand. "Catsuki is for her what Nyan-Blake is for me; just another annoying meme. Faunsuki, however, is for her what Kuroko Uchiha is for me; something to be proud of," she explained concisely without taking her eyes off her book.

"Okay," Ilia said slowly, "Okay, fair enough, but…I don't get it, she's giving up her thumbs just to make a point? Isn't that kind of like shooting yourself in the foot to make a race more interesting?"

"HA!" Natsuki suddenly threw her head back and shouted, making Ilia jump back. "Giving up their thumbs might handicap your average mook, but for a pro like myself it's no big deal at all!"

'Nope, she's not "Feisty". She's "Pride",' Blake decided.

"But…I don't…it doesn't bother you at all that you're throwing away a part of yourself?!" asked Ilia, who felt certain there was something deeply wrong with this but unsure how to put it into words.

"Huh?" Natsuki looked confused. "Why? I can get them back whenever. Do *you* cry over getting your hair cut?"

"Of course not, but that's hardly the same thing as *losing my thumbs* ."

Natsuki stared at the chameleon girl. She raised her paws, which blinked back into hands. Then she switched them back again. "Wow, what a horrific loss," she deadpanned, "I really don't get what the big deal is."

"Look, it's great you relate to the Faunus and all, but what you're doing here is tantamount to mutilating yourself just to fit in," Ilia said evenly, folding her arms.

"Hold up, you've got it twisted," Natsuki said, holding up her paws like 'whoa'. " *Yuri* is the self-mutilator, depending on how you define "mutilation". I'm the badass of the group."

"I'm sorry, but *what* ?" Kali spoke up from the side, looking shocked. "What do you mean, Yuri's a self-mutilator?"

Natsuki abruptly looked uncomfortable. "Aw, crap…that's why we usually don't bring that up…" She turned to Kali, "Okay, so, you know how Yuri has a thing for knives?"

Kali nodded.

"Yeah…well, she's got a *thing* for knives," Natsuki explained somewhat cagily. Kali's eyes widened. "Wait! That makes it sound a lot worse than it is–"

"No, duh," Blake remarked dryly as her tea kettle started whining. She Pocketed her book and slipped off of the counter to take it off the stove.

"Yuri? That tall, quiet friend of yours? Are you saying she…she…" Ilia didn't seem to be able to finish the sentence.

"She's a cutter, yes, it's a whole *thing* with her, and it weirds the rest of us out too but it really isn't *as* bad as…" she trailed off at the sight of Kali and Ilia's increasingly horrified expressions. "Gyah! I suck at this," Natsuki hissed under her breath. She inhaled deeply. "Alright, look, chill out, both of you. *It's not a big deal* . I promise you."

"Natsuki," Kali spoke up gently, "I realize that for Loopers like us, death and permanent injury are…marginalized, but self-harm is still a *very* serious problem. It's not something to trivialize."

"I'm not, I get it, trust me, I know how you guys feel about your bodies and stuff, but we're not–we're different, you can't really put us in the same frame as normal– *fuck* , I'm starting to sound like Yuri," Natsuki groaned.

"Relax, Nat," said Blake, having put four steaming cups on a tray. "C'mon, let's sit at the table and you can explain it from the top."

"Can't you?" Natsuki whined as she followed Blake into the other room, past a still-stricken-looking Kali.

"Hey, you broke it, you fix it. And I only sort-of understand it myself," said Blake.

A moment later found Blake, Kali, Ilia, and Natsuki seated around the table, each with a cup tea steeping in front of them. Kali and Ilia both looked very concerned, and Natsuki looked awkward and couldn't stop fidgeting. Blake just sat back and observed the proceedings with a neutral expression.

Natsuki took a deep breath. "Okay, so…you need to understa–crap, wait, no. Monika always says to lead with "I" messages, not "you" messages," she muttered, recalling her president's advice on persuasive speaking. "Okay, so…I'm not actually a Faunus, obviously. Not in my baseline at least. But the thing is, I'm not a human being either. And Monika, Sayori, and Yuri aren't, either. In baselines, we aren't any kind of member of the animal kingdom at all."

"What do you mean?" Kali asked.

"Remember when Ruby told us about their game?" Blake spoke up. "Yeah, that game isn't just the form their Hub back-up takes. That game is their actual baseline. They're video game characters."

"And not complicated ones from some hi-tech futuristic VR game, either," Natsuki sighed, Unpocketing several pictures of herself in different poses, a small stack of papers stapled together with writing on them, and a music box onto the table in front of her. Natsuki planted one paw on top of the music box, pinched the key between the knuckles of her other paw, and thusly winded it. When she opened it, it started playing music. "This, right here? These pictures, these words, this background music?" said Natsuki, waving her paw over them. "This is my baseline form. That's all that I was, before I inexplicably started Looping."

"I don't get it," Ilia said bluntly, while Kali seemed lost in thought.

"You guys know what visual novels are, right?" Natsuki asked. They both nodded. "You know what 'dating simulators' are?" More nods. "Well, that's the kind of game I'm from. I wasn't a sophisticated artificial intelligence construct with a programmed personality or anything cool like that. I was just a collection of sprites and lines of text with a leitmotif, all of which popped up on screen in response to the player's choices in accordance with the game's script. I wasn't even a person at all, just a concept that the game painted in the player's imagination. We all were. There wasn't anything more to us than that. Until Monika became real."

Natsuki stopped to take a sip from her tea, carefully holding the cup between her paws. Then she continued, Kali and Ilia leaning forward a little. "To this day, none of us have any idea how it happened. Not even Monika herself. But she became real. Became aware of the world outside of the game…or at least that there *was* a world outside of the game. Hell, that there was even a game. Then, she started Looping. Then, somehow, even though none of us had minds of our own, we all became Loopers as well. None of us realized we weren't human, though, until we actually became human for the first time, in our first Fused Loop. It was weird, but it was amazing…and then, when we went back to our own Loop, that was when…well, for me at least, that was when it finally sunk in."

Natsuki sat her tea down, and stared at her reflection in it for a moment. "I may look human, and act like a human, but I'm *not* . Monika, Sayori, Yuri, and I. We're not…meat-people like you all. We're AIs, more akin to Penny, or Church. So…our bodies aren't a part of us they way your bodies are part of you." She tapped her paw against the side of her head. "All that we are is up here. In our own world, our bodies are just avatars we use to express ourselves. In fleshy-loops, they're meatsuits. We aren't too deeply attached to them. So, for example, if one of us was to…say, lose a limb? That's some traumatic shit for a normal person, as I know you guys are well aware."

Blake nodded. "Can confirm, people don't like getting amputated."

"You grow up with your bodies. They change over time, but they're still your bodies. They're a part of how you are, so when you suffer a permanent physical injury it affects you on a psychological level. Losing an arm fucks you up pretty bad. If I were to lose an arm? I'd be pissed, and annoyed, and possibly embarrassed, and definitely in a lot of pain. Then I'd turn to Monika or Sayori and be like, "Hey, can you fix this real quick? I was in the middle of something." For me, or the others, losing a body part isn't like losing part of ourselves so much as…losing a swimsuit at the waterpark. It's humiliating and awkward, but easily fixed. In a digital world, Monika can code us a replacement. In a material world, Sayori's got fully-automated cyber-prosthetics for every contingency. In a Null Loop, or if one of them isn't available? Well, that's a bummer, but oh well. No point getting all worked up over it. Shit happens."

Kali and Ilia exchanged a look, clearly not entirely convinced. Blake just sipped her tea and observed.

"And obviously I don't mean to trivialize what happened to Yang," Natsuki added, "I just picked that example because I knew it was something you guys could use to give context to the situation."

"Of course," said Blake. "Something Monika taught you, right? Use examples your audience can relate to?"

"Anyways…suppose that one loop, Penny decided to swap out one of her hands for, say, a Buster Cannon. Or if Church decided to spend a Loop as a tank. That's about how big a deal it is for me to trade hands for paws. My physical form, whatever it may be, is essentially clothing to me. Same goes for the others. So in this context, Yuri's…habit…is like…I don't know, putting rips in your jeans or whatever. Yes, self-harm is serious business. For fleshies. Because there's a connection between mind and body, so one affects the other. For us, the body is just a tool for interacting with the world outside of our heads. And that's it. Yuri is obsessed with physical sensation, and because pain feels good to her…yeah, I can't say I like it, but what Yuri does to herself is her business."

"That's an *extremely* negligent way to deal with it," Kali spoke up, her voice quivering.

"And if we were human you'd be right," Natsuki agreed without issue, "But we *aren't* . We're…us. I hate to be the one waving the "we're just different" card, but you really can't hold us to the same psychological standards as yourselves. Our mental/physical disconnect breaks that mold real quick."

"You guys don't act anything like AIs, though," said Ilia, remembering the AIs she had met when she replaced South Dakota.

"Yeah, well, not all AIs are all 'beep, boop, does not compute.' Look at Church. He's just a regular dude that happens to be a computer program," Natsuki said, waving one of her paws in the air dismissively. "We have a "when in Rome" policy. Around humans, we just don't bring up the AI thing. If we meet other AIs, we bring it up as an icebreaker. Like, "ones and zeroes, am I right, dude? Ell-oh-ell." I think Monika's the only one of us that actually has any…AI Pride, I guess? She's Replaced other AIs in other Loops, a lot more often than the rest of us. And in most of those Loops, there's a whole racial thing with Synthetic lifeforms. Like how it is with Faunus here on Remnant."

Ilia leaned back on her arms and stared upwards. Kali, by contrast, stared down at her lap and rubbed her head. Natsuki sighed.

"Look. I get that it's weird, that isn't lost on me. But this is part of our reality. Monika's a lot better at explaining this crap than I am. I like keeping things simple, but this isn't something you can easily simplify."

"No, I think I get it," Ilia said suddenly, "But then, if your bodies are really so…immaterial to you, then again, why the paws?"

"Symbolism," Natsuki said plainly, putting 'herself' back in her Pocket and replacing it with a blank sheet of paper and a pen, which she held between her knuckles. Then, with surprising speed, she started drawing. "A show of solidarity. But mostly…I guess I just look up to Blake a lot. That's all."

Ilia looked at Natsuki, then at Blake, then back at Natsuki. "Huh. Really?"

"Yeah! She's a total fucking *ninja* , and she kicks ass with cute kitty ears on her head and doesn't take anyone's crap," Natsuki said excitedly, still drawing, "She's the coolest!"

"Well yeah, no argument there," Ilia said quickly, "I just thought…you seem more like someone who would idolize Yang, if anything."

Natsuki wrinkled her nose. "Ehh…Yang's cool too, I guess, but she doesn't have Blake's chill. And she's too…pun-happy. I've suffered no end of grief from puns in the loops. And she's *way* too showboat-y. No modesty at all."

Blake died a little inside, heroically restraining herself from laughing out loud at that. She hid her amused smile by taking a long drink from her tea. She noticed her mother doing the same.

"But you…never mind," said Ilia.

"So, any more questions?" Natsuki asked, laying her pencil down and holding up her drawing for the others to see. It was a comic-style sketch of Blake and Natsuki in samurai armor action-posing back-to-back, Blake with Gambol Shroud and Natsuki with a kanabo. It was no masterpiece, but it was astonishingly well-done for someone with no thumbs. "Why the shocked looks? I told you, a real pro doesn't let a little thing like not having thumbs stop her from being raw awesome. I am a full metric ton of badass stuffed into a 95 pound meat-bun. Ya dig?"

"Alright, fine, I get it," Ilia groaned, "Obviously you've practiced extensively for this."

"Duh. A pro doesn't half-ass important stuff. That's what makes her a pro," Natsuki said emphatically. Then she frowned and sniffed. "Anybody else smell something bur–"

"MY BASUNDI!" Kali screamed, jumping over the table and dashing into the kitchen.

Natsuki turned to the other two. "So…anybody up for charades?"

Scene 5: Not Exactly A Cakewalk

(DDLC)/(RWBY)

(By me)

"Okie-doki-doki, Weiss; I don't doubt that whoever you've put in charge of baking is more than equal to the task, but there's no such thing as too much help for a confectionary endeavor on this scale," said Natsuki as she marched–nay, *strutted* –up to the duly appointed Wedding Organizer. "So, who should I report to, to lend a helping hand?"

"Oscar and Neo are in charge of catering; Neo's the baker," replied Weiss without looking away from the holographic display to which she was making minute adjustments.

Natsuki's bombastic grin faltered somewhat, and she felt a tiny prickle of cold in her gut. "I'm sorry, did you say Oscar and *Neon* ?" she asked, a just-barely perceptible edge of desperation to her voice. Sure, on one hand it didn't make a whole lot of sense to have a non-Looper bake for a Looper Wedding, but on the other hand Natsuki thought that even Neon Katt must be a more sensible choice than *that person* .

"No, Oscar and *Neo* ," Weiss reaffirmed to Natsuki's dismay, "Neopolitan Torchwick, remember? You met her your last loop here, didn't you?"

"Yes…yes I did…" Natsuki said hollowly, staring thousands of yards into the middle distance.

Weiss glanced at her, smiling a little. "Not a fan, I take it? Well, I won't hold it against you. Neo isn't the kind of person anyone is *expected* to get along with. If you're still set on lending a hand, I'm sure we can figure out a different–"

"Absolutely not!" Natsuki abruptly exclaimed, raising and clenching a fist. "I swore to devote *all* of my skill and passion to baking the best damned cakes I've ever baked, just for this wedding! A classy ninja-lady like Blake Belladonna deserves nothing less than the absolute best of the best that the Multiverse has to offer. And that's *my baking* , you hear me?!" Weiss raised an eyebrow as Natsuki started emitting a burning *shonen* battle aura. A bright pink one, to be specific. And it wasn't just a visual gag, either, Weiss soon realized. Natsuki's aura was, in fact, steadily intensifying, and raw power was starting to radiate from her. And if the Eldest Of All Schnees was not mistaken, there was pale-pink *steam* raising from the short girl's skin.

"But if I'm to do my best work alongside a *demon* like Neopolitan, she who's as disgusting a person as she is phenomenal a sweets-maker, then the power of a human or Faunus Natsuki will suffice!" Natsuki carried on. "I'm left with no choice but to assume my *ultimate form* , my Absolute Last Resort Trump Card, the terrible power I

swore only to use to confront the most *dire* of challenges! And I can't think of any challenge more dire than working alongside a psycho that I'm not already friends with…VERILY! This demands nothing less than my most potent Secret Ability!"

Weiss had Unpocketed a bag of popcorn and held it out towards Natsuki. It was fully popped in short order, and she popped a few of the salty popped kernels into her mouth while she nonchalantly observed Natsuki's spectacle of hot-blooded-ness. She was *definitely* steaming all over by now, her aura was blazing a dark magenta, and the air around her was vibrating with her terrible power.

Then Natsuki exploded into a cloud of pink mist.

The mist quickly coalesced into a doughy, humanoid figure, which bubbled and churned before resolving itself into the great, the terrible, the *mighty* …Majin Natsuki.

Even by Majin standards, her skin was an intense shade of pink. She was now wearing a pair of white parachute pants, yellow boots and gloves, and a black vest with yellow trim over a bandage-wrapped chest. The sclera of her eyes were black and the irises pink, and she had not one, but two antennae that stood straight up and rather resembled rabbit ears. She glanced up, frowned, and scrunched up her face in concentration; the antennae shrank down and widened into triangular lumps, before flattening into an unmistakable pair of pink cat ears.

"I promised Blake, Yang, Ruby, and Monika all that I wouldn't *start* any fights this loop…but if Neo wants to start anything, this form gives me the most options for putting up with her nonsense." She nodded decisively, to herself it would seem, and then disappeared in a flicker.

…

An hour and a half or so later, Monika came around. "Um, Weiss? Has Natsuki been through here?" she asked, "Sayori and I wanted to get her opinion on something."

"She went to help Neo with the baking," replied Weiss, who was using her Scroll's calculator for some logistics work.

"…I'm sorry, did you say *Neo* ? As in 'Roman Torchwick's Charmingly Sociopathic, Sadistic, Possibly Nymphomaniacal Little Ice Cream Girl' Neo?"

"The one and only," Weiss replied casually. "Then she made an anime speech and transformed into a Majin before she left. That was over an hour ago, and seeing as there's nothing on social media about half of Vale burning down, either they're getting along or they're at least being discreet." Weiss glanced up, and saw that Monika had already departed. And with great haste, judging by the gust of wind she had felt.

…

Monika burst into the kitchen, and boggled at the sight before her. Natsuki, indeed in her Majin form, was bouncing around the room trying to tag Neo with ki blasts or her kanabo, which her time on Remnant had inspired her to add chaingun, grenade launcher, and flamethrower elements to. Neo was also running and jumping and generally parkouring all over the place, retaliating with a freeze ray in one hand and some kind of contraption that fired rapidly spinning beaters in the other. She also kept switching one of her weapons out, presumably into her Pocket, for her umbrella to use as a shield against anything she couldn't dodge.

Despite the on-going conflict, they both periodically stopped to grab something out of a cupboard or a refrigerator, or to add something to one of several bowls full of different kinds of batter scattered across the counterspace. Strangest of all, however, was that occasionally one of them would stop at a bowl, realize that the other one had whatever they needed, call for it, *and the other one would comply* . A

bunch of timers went off in rapid succession, and Natsuki and Neo literally dropped their weapons to grab cakes, cupcakes, muffins, and other assorted confections (but mostly cakes) out of ovens, place them on counters, pour batter into pans, pop them in ovens, and set fresh timers. Then they'd grab their weapons and get right back to it. Monika could only assume the ovens were specially modified with insulation against all the shockwaves. In fact, despite the level of ham they were going, the kitchen around them seemed to suffer little-to-no collateral damage.

"Sufficiently-close-to-indestructible kitchen appliances," spoke up Oscar from a nearby stove where he appeared to be mixing some kind of soup. Monika didn't quite flinch, but she did turn to face him rather quickly. She had taken no notice of his presence at first. He was attired as a professional chef, hat and all, and Monika observed with amazement as he maneuvered between the two raging combatants with ease. He, too, moved all over the room to tend to more than a dozen different dishes in progress, but he did so without any evident haste or hurry. As he did so, he continued to speak to Monika telepathically, seeing as she'd never be able to hear him over the fight otherwise. " *Ruby and Nora put this set-up together eons ago, long before I ever even appeared in Baseline from what I'm told, so they could spar while they were baking without having to move too far away from their work. Though, their sparring is a lot friendlier and far less…BST-laden…than this, I have to admit.* "

" *That makes sense,* " Monika replied in kind as she continued to stand in the doorway while watching Natsuki and Neo go at it. " *Hold on, 'BST-laden'? You don't actually think…* "

" *I could be wrong,* " Oscar shrugged, " *Neo has two main settings when she fights: flirty, and trollish, and sometimes it's hard to be certain which one she's being. And also Ax-Crazy Sadist, but that one only comes out when "acceptable targets" are available. I don't think your friend is interested, either way, but she* was *getting a little…let's say 'tentacle-happy' a while ago. Until Neo got out the freeze ray.* "

" *Nat does like to go ham with the Combat Tentacles whenever she Majins up, I've noticed. I never wondered if there was anything Freudian to it before now. Huh.* "

" *Careful about mentioning Freud around Weiss. Might trigger a minor rant,* " Oscar cautioned.

" *Noted,* " Monika nodded. " *So…should I do something, or are they…fine? Like this?* "

" *Don't worry,* " Oscar chuckled under his breath, " *This kitchen has seen way worse. And if they get too carried away, I can handle your friend and talk Neo down.* "

Monika frowned. " *I know we aren't very powerful by Looper standards, but Natsuki's not one to back down easily. She may be the youngest of us, but she's easily the most tenacious as well.* "

Oscar looked directly at her and half-smiled. " *Even so, I can manage.* "

"Alrighty then," Monika murmured to herself, before reluctantly turning and leaving the three of them to their affairs.

Shortly afterwards Neo pulled out a RYNO V, Natsuki whipped out a BFG 9000, and Oscar let out an agitated sigh.

…

Eventually, Neo and Natsuki wore each other down to the point that they came to an unspoken agreement to focus their remaining energy on baking. By the end of the day, they put together enough sweets to feed a small army after an unlikely triumph.

Sitting back against a wall, they admired the fruits of their labor. They were both covered in splats of batter, Natsuki having reverted back to human form.

"It'll do, I suppose," Natsuki grunted, stifling a yawn.

Neo snorted. "You're not at all hard to please," she snarked.

"I'm a perfectionist when it comes to baking. You wanna make something out of it?" asked Natsuki, side-glaring at her.

Neo pretended to look thoughtful for a bit. Then she shook her head. "Nah. You're cute when you get all feisty."

" *Don't call me cute, you ice cream devil* !" Natsuki snarled at her.

"The feistier you get, the more adorable you get. Ain't *my* fault," replied Neo.

"I WILL END YOU!" Natsuki declared as she leaped up to her feet, a warhammer appearing in her hands.

"Please take it outside," Oscar pleaded.

Scene 6: Doki Doki Style

(DDLC)/(RWBY)

(By me)

Monika was their leader, so it was only natural that she led the way. At Yuri's insistence, she was wearing her hair down for a change. Because Sayori had thought it would look nice, they had fixed Monika's hair so it rippled down in waves, with two strands of ringlets framing her face. And as a last minute fixture (and possibly just so she didn't feel left out) Natsuki had grabbed Monika's iconic white hair-ribbon and tied it around Monika's neck, like a choker. Rather than hide the tails of the ribbon under her hair, Natsuki had tied the ribbon so that they would hang in front of her cleavage. "Draws the eye, like a necklace, but doesn't look as out-of-place with your armor as a regular necklace would," Natsuki had explained. "We're at a wedding, we may as well try to meet people, right?"

To which Monika had no reply.

Armor-wise, Monika wore emerald-green scale-mail in the style of a sleeveless dress with a plunging neckline and miniskirt hemline. Naturally, there was a cloth-padding layer under the armor, because any kind of mail against bare flesh would be absurd. She had matching bracers and thigh-high boots, both with green scales on leather, and wore a pair of green fingerless fighting gloves. Behind her flowed a metallic-green cape with silver trim and an emerald-studded clasp. Because no armor is truly complete without arms, she wore a gun-belt with a pair of jade-handled revolvers. She also had Rip Van Winkle's magic musket held against her shoulder. It was quite possibly her favorite gun that she hadn't built herself.

As Monika's faithful VP, Sayori followed behind her and to the right. Where Monika favored green, Sayori was wearing red. As her friends had predicted, she had waffled over and over again on her armor design. She had also pancaked, flapjacked, and possibly even French-toasted. In the end, she had simply cleaned up her ceremonial Sith armor. A red robe with black trim over Mandalorian-style light armor with sky-blue plates on a dark-pink cloth base. She didn't have a helmet, of course, preferring just the hood of her robe. On the back of the robe was an enlarged version of the Cutie Mark she'd had as 'Sunshower'; a sun poking out from behind a dark raincloud. Clipped to her left hip was a coiled-up lightwhip, which glowed a dazzling shade of pink when in use, and on her right hip was a more traditional, red-bladed lightsaber. Holstered on the small of her back, out of sight, was a blaster she had modified to fire Silly String with enough pressure to knock a man across a room, and enough tensile strength to restrain a fully-grown, fully-raging Bull Rancor. And just in the unlikely case that things got *really* dicey, she had her favorite glow-in-the-dark yo-yo in a secret pocket on her armor.

Yuri walked behind Sayori, and to Monika's left. Whereas Monika was wearing her hair down for a change, Yuri had decided to put hers up for once. Her rich, lavender mane piled up on her head in an ornate topknot with two sticks crossing to form an X. She, alone, did not appear to be wearing armor at all. At first glance, it was just a

very shiny homongi-style kimono that made no rustling sound as she moved, not even in total silence. This was because the kimono was, in fact, woven from sider-silk-thin threads of Vibranium, mixed in with mithril for added shine. And because this was a kimono Yuri had made herself, it was bursting at the seams with symbolism.

The kimono's base color was violet; the color of cosmic harmony in Chinese painting tradition. Embroidered on the back in gold was a vertical column of Chinese characters that boiled down to "Everlasting joy for the happy couple!" Embroidered up, down, and around the sleeves and lower portion were various kinds of flowers, each one chosen for its meaning in hanakotoba, the Japanese language of flowers: Sunflowers for passionate love and radiance, irises for glad tidings and loyalty, lavenders for faithfulness, verbenas for co-operation, pink roses for trust, happiness, and confidence, and yellow, white, and red poppies for success, rejoicing, and fun-loving, respectively. And scattered throughout were a couple of cactus flowers, because she knew what kind of couple Blake and Yang were.

Finally, over the chest was a large taijitu, with yellow in place of white for the 'yang' half. Circling around the taijitu were a black cat, prowling over the yang-half, and a yellow dragon undulating under the yin-half. By using lighter tones in the metal fabric above the yang-half, and darker tones below the yin-half, Yuri had created the illusion of each half casting light and shadow, respectively, on the kimono. As her ceremonial weapon, Yuri had brought along another of her own creations: a naginata with a five-foot ebony haft, and a foot-and-a-half blade that was bone-white. Aside from some magical runework and the striking coloration, the weapon was relatively undecorated. She carried it in one hand, balanced across her shoulder, with her other hand tucked into her kimono.

Bring up the rear, and insisting it was by choice and not because she had the shortest legs, was Natsuki. Unable to figure out a satisfactory combination of "dress" and "armor", she decided to go with traditional plate-mail above the waist with a dress skirt below the

waist. The skirt was ankle length and, as she had promised, it was as frilly as possible. Her frill was *maximum* . Unlike her friends, Natsuki wore a helmet; open-faced and shaped like a lioness's head, with scintillating rubies for the eyes. Strapped across her back was a heavy maul with an octahedronal head carved from a single, solid diamond, and clipped onto her hips were a pair of morningstars. The haft of each weapon was lined with patches of clingy material to make them easier to wield with her Faunus cat-paws. With said paws, she was carrying a six-foot tall pole, from which waved an eight-foot long banner that billowed in the breeze. The banner sported black and yellow vertical stripes, and written in big, bold, font, colored black on the yellow stripes and yellow on the black stripes, was the proclamation " **BUZZ, BUZZ, MOTHERFUCKERS!** "

Thusly arrayed, the four of them made their way towards the wedding grounds.

Scene 7: Recognition.

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(SD Gundam Force)

(By Shadow Wolf75)

It was maybe a day after the Reds and Blues showed up. Captain Gundam and Professor Gerbera were both off duty on this fine Remnant morning, free to wander around and socialize or even help the other Loopers out with the wedding preparations if they wanted.

Wandering was the order of the hour, at least for the moment. Well, it was, until the taller black-armored SD Gundam caught sight of a set of four vaguely familiar girls working on something at a table a good distance ahead of them. Gerbera froze for a second, though he at least managed to avoid startling. "Those four are Looping?!"

Beside him, Captain glanced up ahead, taking note of whoever it was up ahead. Four high school aged girls, the two shortest of which had different shades of pink hair, the tallest having long purple hair, and the second tallest with long red hair pulled back in a high

ponytail. Right, they were from some visual novel he remembered suddenly gaining popularity in a recent Hub loop... something about a literature club? Sayori, Natsuki, Yuri, and Monika-

And then Captain fully recalled his memories of said VN, evoking a sinking feeling, only made worse by the low growl he just heard out of his brother. He sighed at this, shaking his head. "Apparently they are? I take it you've seen their Baseline as well... if they're all here, and okay with each other, I imagine she's not doing that any more."

No dice, and the growling out of Gerbera got a tiny bit louder.

Well, nothing else for it then. Captain elbowed his brother, and made use of the one other thing likely to get him to snap out of it. Gerbera's given name. "Madnug..."

That, along with the elbow to his side, got the professor to finally startle and glare at his brother in irritation. "Captain, you know what I said about using that name in public-" Gerbera blinked, then realized what he'd been doing just now. "Oh. I- I'm sorry, Captain. It's just what happened to them, and what Zeong did to me... it cuts a bit close, you know?"

The white-armored Gundam nodded. "Indeed. But I think this is similar to your own case in another way, actually."

"In what way?"

At the table up ahead, Natsuki suddenly got the feeling they were being watched, and on glancing around, she caught sight at the two robots in the distance. Two SD Gundams, likely in the same design series... say, didn't she watch something like that in their last Hub loop? SD Gundam Force, as it was known in the Hub, had cute little robots saving the world, what's not to love? Except later on things took a turn for the darker, much like their own loop. Oh crap, if that was Captain Gundam, then the other one had to be-

Natsuki glanced up at her friends. Monika and Yuri were focused on their work, though Sayori seemed a bit less so, and thus she was the one the shorter girl got the attention of. She reached out to poke her friend's arm, whispering, "Sayori, is that who I think it is? Why the hell would he be Looping?"

Sayori was a little bit out of it, probably because of the negative feelings she'd been picking up as a Force sensitive, though Natsuki's poke brought her back to reality. She looked in the direction indicated, soon sighting Captain and Gerbera in the distance. The negative feelings were also coming from that direction, not entirely a surprise given what she also remembered of the two robots' Hub backup. Gerbera's fate at the end of his Baseline was strangely similar to what happened to her, in fact.

Well, Natsuki was still waiting, and thus Sayori whispered back. "Professor Gerbera, right? I guess... his Admin and Anchor wanted to give him a chance. Looks like it worked out, otherwise he wouldn't be so calm, or even be here with his brother at all."

Natsuki sneaked a glance at the bots in the distance again. Well, they were just hanging out, taking in the sights; that wouldn't be the case if things weren't okay. She shrugged, just accepting it and getting back to the task at hand. "Hmm, if you say so."

With that settled, Sayori happened to notice the two Gundams in the distance were actually looking their direction. She caught Gerbera's gaze and smiled faintly at him, then discreetly held up one hand to flash a v-sign in his direction.

Back with the two Gundams, Captain replied to his brother's query, seeing Sayori's gesture. "In what way? That neither you or Monika are your Baseline selves."

Gerbera glanced at the ground for a few seconds, a bit humbled. "Y-yes, that's right." He looked up and flashed a v-sign of his own at Sayori, also smiling back. "I should be fine now, just needed that reminder."

The moment passed and the two robots began to head elsewhere. Weiss walked up to them before too long, though. "Oh, good, I didn't have to use Force Calm on anyone this time. There's something of an engineering task I could use some help with over here... would that settle your nerves a bit more, Professor?"

The black Gundam almost raised his voice in protest, perhaps somewhat offended the Schnee heiress had been keeping an eye on them. But her suggestion did sound better than just aimlessly wandering around the wedding grounds. "Yes, it would. Coming, Captain?"

"Why not? Glynda doesn't need us for a few more hours, anyway."

Scene 8: Doki Doki Loot

(DDLC)/(RWBY)

(By me)

"Frabjous day to you, our blessed friends!" Monika called grandly to the happy couple, making a sweeping bow.

"Yo," Yang greeted back, flashing a peace sign and lounging against Blake's side.

Blake smiled as she absent-mindedly ran her fingers over Yang's scalp. "Well you seem unusually high-key today, Monika. Festive atmosphere gotten to you?"

"Nah, it was Caboose," Sayori spoke up.

"Caboose?" asked Blake.

"We passed the Reds an–well, technically, it was just the Blues. Well, *technically* it was just Caboose and Tucker," said Sayori, "Point is, Monika saw Caboose, drank something out of a flask from her Pocket, and…I don't know, she's been like *this* ever since."

"On this, the indefinably splendiferous occasion of your glorious union, we of the Doki Doki Looping Literature Club present ourselves before thee with hearts BURSTING with good will and vicarious rapture!" Monika announced, emphatically thumping the butt of her musket on the ground.

"We also brought gifts!" Sayori added, throwing back her hood. A top hat popped into being on her head, which she took off and reached her hand into. She started pulling out a long chain of multi-colored scarves tied together. She spent a good thirty seconds pulling them out, letting them fall into a heap at her feet. When she had pulled the whole chain out, there was a pile of scarves that went up to her knees. Then she flipped the hat upright, holding it by its brim, and discus-threw it away as hard as she could to her right. Sayori then pulled her hood back up, reached into her cloak, and produced a small cloth bag. She opened the bag and up-ended it, scattering a bit of glistening dust over the scarf pile. Then she crouched down, scooped up the whole pile, and flung them into the air with a shout of "Ekat thgilf!"

And then the multicolored scarves were a flock of colorful birds, taking wing and spiraling out around them, singing in ethereal tones. On closer inspection, they were not really birds at all. Rather, they were bird-shaped masses of soft light. Higher and higher they flew, until they suddenly burst into a spectacular fireworks display.

Blake and Yang started clapping, but Sayori held up her hand. "Please hold your applause until the end."

A moment later, Blake's ears started twitching. "Does anyone else hear whistling?" she asked. She looked up, and Yang copied her. There was, indeed, a loud whistling sound coming from high above them all. The whistling grew in volume until it was a low keening, and then a massive trunk fall out of the sky. Just before it could slam into the ground, Sayori threw her hand up again and the trunk came to a dead stop. Sayori made a 'go on, scoot' motion with her hand, and the trunk lazily drifted over to Blake and Yang before dropping in front of them. Sayori snapped her fingers, and the trunk's lid popped

open. Confetti, balloons, fireworks, glitter bombs, and the sound of air horns and trumpets came flying out of it.

Blake and Yang exchanged a look before leaning forward to see what was left in the trunk, if anything. Then their eyes widened, and Yang practically jumped into the trunk to pull out its remaining contents. To wit: a collection of hand-stitched plush figures. Most of them were obviously Blake and Yang, some being realistically proportioned and some being chibi-style. Some of the Yang plushies gave her different kinds of Faunus features, and instead of showing Yang and Blake in their normal forms some of them were just black cats and yellow dragons. There were also yellow cats and black dragons. Some were Ponysonas of Blake or Yang, and some looked like they could be Blake or Yang as a Pokémon. And every single plushie was unique; either it had a different outfit, or had a different facial expression, or had some sort of quirky accessory. And despite all the things that had been initially released from the trunk, it was still mostly full of plushies, and big enough for Yang to completely submerge herself. And it looked like there would be room to spare for Blake as well.

Yang's head popped up out of the plushie pool. "Blake, they *smell* like us! All the mes smell like me and all the yous smell like you, and the smells aren't all mixed up!" She turned to Sayori, "How'd you do that?"

"If I told you that Pinkie Pie helped me figure it out, would you still want to know?" Sayori asked with a sly grin.

"Never mind," Yang replied, before submerging herself once more.

Blake grabbed a Chibi-Yang out of the trunk and inspected it, turning it over in her hands. "This is pretty exceptional handiwork, Sayori. How long did this take you?"

"Well, I started working on the first one our third night at Beacon, last loop we were here," said Sayori, "And I finished the last one yesterday afternoon. So approximately seven and a half subjective

years. And I spent an average of four days on each plush. Like, four days from when I started to when I finished, not four days straight of doll-making. That would be silly." Sayori glanced away and fingered the hem of her hood. "I mean, I knew there was no way I could come up with anything that would be *useful* to Loopers so much older than me…" Her eyes widened and she gasped, "Not that I think of you guys as old! Haha, I mean, I…you…erm…"

Blake just laughed and pulled Sayori into a one-armed hug. "Calm down, kid. You're fine. These are great. Thank you, Sayori."

"Hah…haha…thanks, Blake," Sayori laughed nervously, hugging Blake back.

"MY TURN!" exclaimed Natsuki, stepping up. She slammed her banner down, imbedding the pole into the ground. She threw her paws up above her head, and a large roll of canvas popped out of her Pocket and into her paws. She took a knee and held it out in offering.

Blake took the roll from her and glanced at the chest. "Hey, Yang, c'mon out of there and take a look at this…Yang?"

A full ten seconds passed before Yang finally dolphin-jumped out of the trunk. Complete with dolphin sound effects, somehow. "Pretty sure there's an Undetectable Extension Charm on this thing," she commented.

"Could be," said Sayori with a shrug, "I got it from Master Pinkie, and the first thing I learned as her student was 'don't think *too* hard about it'. Could be vanilla-magic, could be Warp-powered; heck, for all I know it could be a Hammerspace trunk just *because* it came from *her* ."

"Ahem," Natsuki said pointedly, tapping her feet.

"Oh, right," said Blake, holding the roll out to Yang, "This is from Natsuki."

Yang grabbed the edge of the roll, and together she and Blake unrolled it. Fully unfurled, the canvas was five feet wide by eight feet long. Blake and Yang took a moment to stare in appreciative awe at the image upon it.

It was a *ridiculously* detailed and absurdly intricate (to say nothing of it being simply massive) mandala. It appeared to be a digital transcription of what had originally been a watercolor painting. On first glance it appeared to be your typical lotus-with-a-thousand-petals set-up, but on closer inspection the 'petals' were actually Blake and Yang's emblems alternating. Blake and Yang studied the image for a good ten minutes, finding all sorts of homages: books, motorcycles, ninja tools, boxing gloves, Uchiha fans, surgical tools, fishes, chibi-style Oozarus, cats made of shadows, dragons made of fire…

It didn't take long for Blake to realize that she could study the painting for days on end and still not find everything. Finally she stopped staring and looked back up at Natsuki. "Very intricate, this. You must have done a lot of research during that one loop," she remarked.

"Yeah…like Sayori said, there isn't much we can offer in terms of practical gifts," said Natsuki, "So I figured, maybe something you can use to decorate some corner of your Pocket. Or something. I don't know, I just wracked my brain for six hours until I had an idea for a gift that didn't sound like garbage, and then…y'know…poured my heart and soul into it. Like ya do." She shrugged and gave a small, unusually genuine smile. Not that Natsuki was one for fake smiles, but Blake had come to realize that she had a habit of "puffing her chest out" as it were.

"Not bad, Nats. Not bad at all," said Yang, rolling up the mandala.

"Yeah, having rat and gnat forms helped me get all the teeny, tiny details right."

"You have a gnat form?" Yang asked.

"We spent a loop as bugs. I was…Gnatsuki," said Natsuki with a long, sullen groan.

Yang threw her head back and guffawed. "That's so great!"

"Yeah, yeah, glad *you* enjoy the pun loops, Golden Child. I, for one, have had my fill of loops where I have some ridiculous form just because my name has a syllable that's easily swapped out for rhyming one-syllable words."

"Forms like the ones that you just admitted came in handy?" Blake asked with a catty grin.

Natsuki inhaled sharply, and then just sighed. "Yeaaaaaah…I guess. Still, it was annoying to spend a whole loop as a little pink rat. That was way back, before Monika had built up confidence in her spriting skills and before I found out I can just shift between bodies I've had."

"Ahem," spoke up Yuri, stepping forward. "Second to writing," she began, "Blade-crafting is my best skill. Or my best practiced, at least." Another chest popped into existence next to her, and she tapped the side of it with her naginata. The lid flew open and what appeared to be a filing cabinet shot up out of it, growing and growing until it was at least a hundred meters high. Yuri pulled a drawer open, reached inside, and pulled out a butcher knife in a leather sheath. Drawing it out, Yuri revealed the blade to shiny copper. "Every couple needs a good set of kitchen knives, which is all I intended to make at first, but that only took one afternoon and I figured 'We're Loopers, may as well go all-out'. So I made two of every kind of knife I know how to make, out of every suitable material I had available. From the standard varieties of steel alloy, of course, to a few classical throwbacks like copper, bronze, jade, obsidian, bone, and more 'exotic' materials. Adamantium, Vibranium, Anti-metal, Uru, adamantine, mithril, orichalcum, Celestial bronze, Stygian iron, Imperial gold, Nth Metal, Promethium, Phrik, Beskar, Cold Iron, True Silver, Hihi'irokane, Damascus steel, Daedric Ebony, Morrowind Glass, Thaumium, Brightsteel, several different varieties of Unobtainium…you get the idea, I'm sure."

As she had been speaking, Yuri had set aside her naginata and pulled out one knife after another, showing them off. "Ooh, pretty," said Yang as she admired a sapphire letter-knife. Blake joined in on the rummaging.

"Hold on, is this made of cardboard?" she asked when she pulled out a knife that was, indeed, forged from cardboard.

"Ah!" Yuri yelped, "That's not supposed to be in here…um, sorry, that one isn't part of the set."

"Interesting juxtaposition of absurdly mundane and improbable material with masterful craftwork," Blake complimented as she handed the knife back to Yuri. "Have you ever field-tested it?"

"Oh, this old thing is just the 'proof of concept' as it were," said Yuri as she dropped the cardboard knife into her Pocket. Then another one took its place in her hand, almost identical except for having a darker coloration. " *This* is the practical model. So far its best feat is hacking up a stone golem."

"Oh merciless gods I'm coming doooooooown," whimpered Monika, who was holding her head.

"Coming down from what, exactly?" asked Natsuki, while Sayori laid her hand on top of Monika's head.

Monika shivered briefly, "Something to fluff out the edges of reality, to the point that a conversation with the likes of *the blue one* could be enjoyable, rather than make me pray for an aneurysm. A little something I made myself; it has no common name and its scientific name contains thirty-seven syllables, some of which are borrowed from alien languages that can't be translated into English." She blinked. "I think I'll start calling it Cerebello-Yello. No, that's stupid. Mindmellow. Much better. Okay, we're doing gifts right?"

She stepped forward, held out her hands, and upon each palm appeared a bracelet made of alternating black-and-yellow beads.

Each bracelet included a larger, translucent bead; violet on the left hand, gold on the right. "Personalized Virtual Intelligence Companions," said Monika, holding the violet one out to Yang and the gold one out to Blake, "Basically, non-sentient AI versions of you; whenever both are active, they swap brainwave-pattern analysis data of each other's wearer so that they can update their respective personality approximation matrix, allowing them to make changes to remain consistent with the person they're based on. The idea is for them to help alleviate the stress of being "separated" from each other when only one of you is Awake in a given Loop."

As Yang and Blake put their bracelets on, Monika continued her explanation, "They can also do…you know, pretty much anything you would expect a hi-tech AI to be capable of, with the exception of any task that would require a *sentient* mind to accomplish, since creating sentience is one of those lines I just don't cross. In terms of processing power, they're quantum supercomputers, so they should be useful in all kind of practical situations. You can think of them as Super-Scrolls. Speaking of which, they allow for instant teleconferencing across any distance thanks to Quantum-Entanglement Communications technology, which I've modified with subspace sensory arrays that *should* allow for interdimensional communication…within the same Branch of Yggdrasil, of course. I've proof-tested the tech in a couple different loops with internal multiverses, and it's passed every test so far…though obviously I haven't been able to test it in *every* Branch. The QEC comes with audio-only, holo-chibi, and full-scale hologram options. They can also generate an omni-tool gauntlet with full minifacturing capabilities to allow for flash-fabrication of…ahhh, you know what? They come with comprehensive tutorial modules, so you should be able to figure out their full capabilities on your own. Sorry for being short, but I *really* need a stiff drink. I don't feel so well."

As Monika tried to wander away, Sayori caught her by the shoulder. "Hold up, we've got one more thing to give them, remember?" she asked. Then she jumped up and caught her hat, which came whizzing in from the left. She reached into the hat, and pulled out a

thick book with a handsome, glossy burgundy hardcover. *"For a Night-Cat and a Sun-Wyrm: A Collection of Poems,"* read the title, *"by Monika, Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki. With greatest affection."*

"We were originally going to do a poem each, and then some kind of group project for you guys," said Natsuki, "But then we started pumping out poems like crazy and wound up making *that* the group project, and then we each got our own idea for a personal gift. You've got your obligatory romantic sonnets in there, and poems for other deep, introspective, reflections-of-a-time-looping-immortal-multiverse-traveler kind of stuff, and some funny, light-heart silly stuff. Yuri and Monika came up with some moody and philoso-deep stuff, Sayori and I wrote a bunch of pun-acious limericks and such. Some of it's based on our observations of your relationship, some of it's based on our relationship with you two. This whole thing has actually been our biggest mutual source of poetic inspiration since we all started Looping!"

Sayori handed the book to Blake, and then pulled out a second copy from her hat and handed that to Yang. Then she Pocketed the hat.

"Okay, everyone," Monika grumbled, clapping her hands together, "Gifts have been given, congratulations expressed, we love the both of you and wish you the best for many epochs to come, et cetera, et cetera, ad infinitum. Now, if anyone needs me I'll be hitting Torchwick up for…whatever he's got, honestly, I'm not picky right now. Don't do Mindmellow, kids, it isn't worth the crash. This has been Monika's PSA of the Day." And with that, she ambled away, leaving five ladies with mildly concerned and/or amused expressions in her wake.

Scene 9:

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(Red vs. Blue)/(Half-Life)/(Sailor Moon)/(My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic)

(By me)

The Reception To End All Receptions was well-underway. Maybe she was biased by her status as a perpetual high-schooler, but Monika thought it was starting to look more like the drunken insanity of an after-prom party. Then again, this was her first time attending a Looper wedding, so maybe this was normal? Either way, she was checking up on her friends to make sure they were all having a good time. She had been surprised to find Natsuki chatting amiably with Neo. She made a mental note to ask about that later. Yuri, she found chatting with one Kaikaina Grif.

"Hello Miss Grif," Monika said politely as she approached them.

"Do I know you?" asked Kaikaina, ruddy-faced but only slightly slurring.

"We met in another timeline," Monika explained off-handedly, "Yuri, have you seen Sayori? I seem to have lost track of her."

"Oh…neat," said Kaikaina, seeming to have already lost interest. She turned back to Yuri, "Now, about those 'rope tricks' you were telling me about?"

"Sorry, 'Kaina, kind of have to deal with this real quick," Yuri replied, also looking a bit flushed in the face, holding up a finger. "Yeah, actually, Sayori was the one who brought my attention to the fact that Kaikaina was here. Then she grabbed V and ran off that-a way, asking me if I'd mind keeping this little spitfire out of trouble. On a *completely* unrelated note, have you seen Tucker recently?"

"Who's V?" Monika asked, glancing off in the direction Yuri had indicated. What she saw made her eyes widen. "Oh no… Yuric'monwe'vegottostopthis! NATSUKI! CLUB EMERGENCY!" Then she took off running.

Yuri and Kaikaina followed her, and they were soon joined by Natsuki and Neo. "Hey Prez, where's the fire?" asked Natsuki.

"THERE!" Monika pointed at the stage, where Sayori was adjusting a microphone stand.

"Oh. Oh, this could be bad," Natsuki muttered with wide eyes.

" *The hell's wrong with you guys?* " Neo and Kaikaina asked in tandem, staggering behind them.

Monika opened her mouth, but then music started playing. Yuri sighed, "Maybe we don't need to worry? Remnant's physics certainly have a much higher…stress capacity, I guess? And this Loop probably has an even higher capacity. Keep in mind, Monika, that the last time this happened was in a much more Earth-normal loop."

"Do you *really* want to roll those dice, Yuri? You really want to risk one of *us* being responsible for–"

" *~Just a small town girl, living in a lonely world~* " Sayori started singing, audibly tipsy but much more melodic than Monika was expecting. " *~She took the midnight train going annnyyyyywhere~* "

Then, to their surprise, Gordon Freeman stepped onto the stage with a mic in hand, " *~Just a city boy! Born and raised in South Detroit. He took the midnight train going anYYwheeeeere!~* " he sang in a booming baritone.

"Okay, at this point, I *am* curious enough to let this play out," Natsuki remarked, folding her arms.

Monika opened her mouth, again, to argue the point. But then a plume of fog sprang up from the stage, and Minako Aino stepped out of it. Naturally, Monika clammed up real quick. She was decked out in full pop idol regalia with a *bedazzled* microphone. " *~Just a singer in a smoky room! A smell of wine and cheap perfume.~* "

" *~For a smile they can share the night!~* " broke in Pinkie Pie, poking out from behind Sayori, " *~It goes on and on and on and on and onandonandonandon AND ON!~* "

"When did *she* even get here?!" asked Monika in distress.

Twilight, who happened to walk up just then, shook her head. "She does like this song, and she does rather like Sayori too, so I wouldn't be surprised if the answer was: Just Now."

Then the four chorused together, surprisingly in something resembling harmony, " *~Strangers! Waiting! Up and down the BOULEVARD! Their shadows searching in the NIIIIIIIGHT! Streetlights! People! Living just to find emotion! Hiding somewhere in the NIIIIIIIIIIIGHT!~* "

Everyone watching whipped out various glowing things to wave through the air, while Yuri and Natsuki in particular started cheering. Monika just sighed. *'Oh well…Yuri's right, the odds of Sayori hitting a note high enough to crash* this *Loop are pretty slim. I'm just being paranoid and silly. Now then, I think I'll go assume the fetal position under a table before* she *notices me.'*

Scene 10:

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(Red vs. Blue)

(By me)

Of course, Monika didn't really curl up under a table. She did, however, shake down Roman for something that could help her forget that she was surrounded by so many people that could dispense judgment on her for her sins. And at least one that she feared might feel especially inclined to do so. Sunset was not too far off, and apparently a very inebriated Glynda Goodwitch had practically thrown open the metaphorical gates to all and sundry. For example, the rest of the Sailor Senshi had shown up…and recalling that fact motivated Monika to knock back another shot.

"There are two very different kinds of drinking, and the one you appear to be engaged in is not the kind generally associated with such a joyous occasion as a wedding reception. Unless you happen

to be an exe of one of the lucky lovebirds," remarked the woman sitting next to her.

"I *really* envy yer brav'ry," Monika groaned, blearing half-lidded at Cinder. "You's a'least as nasty a bitch as I am, buh the presence of firs'-gen Bloopers…Loopers, that is, doesn't seem to faze you adall."

Cinder shrugged, still smirking at her. "The difference between you and I is that I respect power, while you are terrified of it."

Monika sighed, and nodded slowly. "Yeah…power scares me. Specially mine."

"You have no reason to be afraid of her, you know. Not tonight, at least. She's a goddess of love, after all. Romantic events like weddings and such are sacrosanct to her. She's not going to do anything to spoil this day," Cinder explained to her.

Monika rolled her eyes. "I know I'm safe *tonight* . 'Swhy I'm getting drunk."

"I think you're well past 'getting' drunk," Cinder dryly observed.

"Problem is, tomorrow's not so sure," Monika grumbled.

"Spend the rest of the loop hiding in your Pocket, then, if you're *that* scared."

Monika gave loud, hideous snort at that. "I'm *not* a coward. When she comes for me, I'll take what's coming to me, like a man…y'know what I meant…"

Just then, Gordon Freeman ran past them, bearing a teetering and giggling Sayori on his shoulders. "Onwards, brave Sir Gideon! We go to face the enemy on the field of battle!"

"Aye, aye, Lady Salami!" replied the thoroughly sloshed physicist. A moment later, they loudly collided with a Sun-Bearing-A-Ruby-On-

His-Shoulders. All four Loopers tumbled to the ground, cackling hysterically.

"Well…glad that one worked out," Monika murmured to herself. "Always nice to see Sayori make new friends…no 'counting for taste, though."

"Wonder if it'll stick after he sobers up?" Cinder questioned.

"Prolly. Sayori's hard not to like."

"I've noted she has a bit of a Ruby-esque charm to her," Cinder observed.

"Hey, has anyone here seen my sister?" asked a very concerned-sounding Grif, walking up to their table. Cinder, Roman, Emerald and Ilia all shrugged.

"Last I saw, she was with Neo an' Natsuki an' Yuri," Monika spoke up.

Grif stared at her. "My sister, the walking Sex Joke with a kink list longer than Donut's innuendo rap sheet, was left alone with Neo, the casually sadistic hedonist with fewer moral qualms than Lopez has fucks to give?" he asked in a tone of barely contained fury/terror.

"…and Yuri, and Natsuki," Monika added sheepishly.

"Those two friends of yours with UST thicker than Sarge's sense of self-importance? *Great* ," Grif practically gnashed his teeth.

"What is with you and the analogies?" asked Cinder.

"Besides, Natsuki and Yuri's UST is actually a lot subtler than most cases," Emerald chimed in. "I'd never have noticed it if I weren't an expert on sexual tension."

"I only picked up on it because Kali did," Ilia admitted.

"I never noticed because I don't really care. I don't even know who you're talking about," said Roman. "As for whatever Neo's up to, I'm not too worried."

"I'm not worried about Neo, I'm worried about my sister! And the Grif family reputation!"

And with that, he stormed off.

A moment later, Yuri came running up to the table; her whole body practically vibrating with more excitement than Monika thought was possible for her to express in a place this crowded. "Monika! Monika! Oh my goodness, Monika, you'll never believe what just happened to me!"

"Whatever you do, don't let Grif hear about it," said Cinder with an amused smile, "He might come for your head."

"Huh?" asked Yuri.

"Ignore her," said Monika, "What's up?"

Yuri flipped back from bemused to *ecstatic* on a dime. She pulled out a book and shoved it in Monika's face. "I *just* found out that Taylor Hebert was a guest here–apparently she was doing the thing with the bees *how did I not notice that?!* –and I got her to autograph my handmade hardcover graphic novel adaptation of her Hub Back-Up! *Can you believe it* ?!"

"Nice…d'you remember to mention you've done that with a lot of stories you like, so she doesn't think you might be an obsessed fangirl or something?" asked Monika, doing her best to push a coherent train of thought through the alcohol-induced haze.

"Yes, and I made sure to excuse myself and leave her alone before I could say or do anything too creepy…I considered showing off the Skitter, Weaver, and Khepri action figures I made, but decided

against it. Do you think she'll hang out on Remnant after the wedding?"

"Anything's possible," Monika yawned. "Oh, by the way, you know where Kaikaina is? Grif's lookin' for her."

Yuri's eyes widened and she *almost* dropped her book. "Oh no…I left her alone with Neo! I completely forgot about her when I saw Taylor…" Then she disappeared with a Shunshin.

"Seems like your friends are having a lot more fun here than you are, Glitch," Emerald remarked with a sly grin.

"I'm *not* too drunk to kick yer snarky ass, Sustrai," Monika growled, even as she was laying her head down on the table.

Then Sayori came running up with Natsuki on her heels. "Monika, c'mon, we're playing Remnantball with Team Junior! Nat, go find Yuri."

"Y'mean Juniper?" Monika asked as Natsuki ran away.

"Yeah, that's what I said. Now get up, come on, let's go!" said Sayori.

"Veeps, I'm…uh…kin'a loaded. Just a little," Monika remarked.

Sayori's reply was to firmly grab Monika's head between her hands and pull her up, and shout "Force Sobriety!"

Monika's head immediately cleared. *Too* immediately. Monika started wincing as a sudden, intense, hangover-like feeling crashed over her. It faded just as quickly. "You actually have a Force power for sobering up? Whyyyyy?" Monika questioned.

"I don't know, ask Master Pinkie why she thought I needed something that equates to a Cure Drunkenness spell," Sayori countered, "Now let's go, we have to show Team Jupiter what we're made of!" yelled Sayori as she ran off.

"Team Juniper!" Monika shouted after her.

"That's exactly what I said!" Sayori shouted back.

Monika stood up slowly. "Alright, guess I have to go get my butt handed to me with my friends," she said to her transient tablemates as she wandered off after Sayori.

Scene 11:

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(Red vs. Blue)

(By me)

"Michael J. Caboose!" yelled an even more drunken Monika as she staggered up to the Blood Gulch Anchor, less than an hour after the game against Team JNPR. They'd given it their all, and they'd all had loads of fun. But in the end, JNPR had won. Obviously.

"Hello, Monitor!" Caboose greeted cheerfully, waving at her energetically.

"Caboose, I've got somethin' I been wanting ta tell at ya fer a while now," said Monika, eyes narrowed as she got all up in his grill.

"What's that? Are you finally going to tell me what is your favorite flavor of ice cream?!" asked an inordinately excited Caboose.

"Hell no, but since you asked it's * *URRP!* * it's Mint Chocolate Chip," Monika replied, "But as I was sayin', I got words fer you. See, you're *dumb* . Like, improbably dumb. An' that can be pretty annoying most times. But if I'm being totes honest, I…I kinda envy your dumbness, Boosey. Can I call ya Boosey? I'mma call ya Boosey. See, Boosey, the problem wiff bein' * *urp* * as smart as I am is that ya *know* shit. An' knowin' shit makes ya worry 'bout shit. I've done drank myself silly cuz I've been freakin' out about some love goddess in a schoolgirl outfit kickin' my *fuckin'* ass because I. Am. The *worst* . You have no friggin concept of how much of a horrible garbage-pile I

really am. Yer too dumb to know how bad I suck. An' if I was as dumb as you, I'd be too dumb to get all worked up 'bout what Venus is gonna do ta me. An' you's a nice guy, too, Boosey. Yer best buds with one o' the top five biggest non-villainous assholes I've ever met, an' he's goddamn lucky to have you fer a pal. Ever hear the phrase "God's Favorite Idiot?" I don't know 'bout God, Boosey, bet yer *my* favorite idiot. An' if you ain't God's favorite idiot, too, then *fuck Him* . He's got bad taste in idiots. Yer the *best* idiot in the Loops, Boosey. Just…" she was more or less leaning against Caboose to avoid falling on her face, at this point. She made a fist and gently pounded it against his chest. "Respect, man. That's all I wanna say. Much respect, from me to you. An' if I start actin' all stuck-up an' bitchy later on, that's just me bein' a stupid smart person. I'm piss-faced drunk right now, case ya hadn't noticed, so I'm too dumb to be an ass…nighty-night," she mumbled before smooshing the side of her face against his chestplate and passing out right there.

"Um…Monitor? It is not nap time yet, it is still party time," said Caboose, "I think…it can't be nap time yet, no one is telling bedtime stories."

"Excuse me," said Yuri as she stepped out of the shadows and gently grabbed Monika, hoisting her into a fireman's carry. "I'll take care of her. And Grif? I asked around, and the last person who saw your sister was Nadia. She said she saw her and Neo sneaking off towards the city before she got distracted by Sasuke and Sailor Mars."

Grif heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Damn it…oh well, nothing for it now," he muttered as Yuri about-faced and headed off.

Scene 12:

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(Sailor Moon)

(By Masterweaver)

"You know, I didn't expect this wedding to be so... awesome."

Sayori snorted. "You're wearing a lion helmet and you didn't think this would be awesome?"

"No, I mean like..." Natsuki gestured around with a paw. "Wedding. Two people kiss, everybody cheers, and then... casual discussion and we hang out for the day. Sure we're wearing armor, but I thought that was just the Remnant equivalent of fancy clothes. And I'd have been happy with that, don't get me wrong, but this is... we just finished a game of Remnantball! There's rock blasting out the speakers-not heavy metal, for some reason-"

"Blake doesn't like heavy metal," Yuri reminded her. "The ears, remember?"

"Oh yeah. And Sayori, you pulled off that musical number earlier... actually there's been a lot of singing. Especially after Glynda basically threw the gates open and Sunset frickin' Shimmer got here. And Yuri got to talk with that bug girl she's fetishized-"

"Not a fetish, ordinary fan-"

"-and there are older loopers throwing down in the bay and... I think there was a robot dinosaur around at one point? One of the guests is a tank. Like, just... not *driving* a tank. She is an *actual* tank. I expected this wedding to be fun and all, but I didn't expect it to be so over-the-top awesome."

"Yeah, kind of wish Monika could see that..." Sayori sighed as she looked over to their club president, who was throwing back another goblet of wine. "She's been freaking out about the Senshi this whole time. I'm tempted to give her more mindmellow."

"...Yeah, I guess that's pretty terrible." Natsuki shrugged. "But aside from that, and I'll concede it's a pretty big that, this wedding is just plain cool. Almost makes me want to change my mind."

She took a sip of her own drink.

"...change your mind about what?" Sayori asked.

"Huh?" Natsuki processed the question for a few moments. "Oh! About, you know, my stance on weddings. Or romance in general."

Sayori, very deliberately, did not glance at Yuri. "Oh?" She focused on Natsuki. "And what is your stance, praytell?"

"I mean, come on, don't you know?"

"I don't think I've ever actually heard you spell it out."

"...mmmngh."

"Oh come on, Nats, it's a wedding!" Sayori proclaimed cheerfully. "If there's any place to talk about love, this is it." She very deliberately continued to look straight at the girl, seemingly oblivious to the sudden interest of their purple-haired companion.

"Ugh, fine. I just didn't want to talk about it with you. What with... you know, our baseline and Hiroaka and all, I didn't want to insult you or anything."

"I totally get that. I can be a bit of a busybody. Still..."

"Right, so... love is... this big thing that a bunch of people have thought about, right? The purpose of life, a chemical reaction in the brain, an endless mystery, yadda yadda yadda. But the core thing everyone agrees about is that romance is about letting somebody... like... mutual trust? Affection? Understanding somebody, deeply, and wanting the best for them, and wanting to be with them... two souls made one. Which is all fancy and great and all, but... how does it apply to me, is the question."

"Oh?"

"Come on, Sayori, just... I was only included in the game for tsundere value. 'It's not like I like you or anything, baka,' and all the jokes about being flustered." Natsuki rested her hand on her cheek

with a sigh. "And let's be real-nobody actually loves that kind of character romantically. It's always 'oh they're adorable,' 'oh I'd love to take them home and cuddle them,' 'look at their cute little temper tantrums.' I'm flat out unlovable-from a romantic standpoint. I mean, I have great friends-don't get me wrong-and I guess maybe I'm being hard on myself, but really? How many people in the multiverse would know me as anything other then 'The Tiny Angry Doki Looper?' And how many people would even be willing to invest the time to get to know me? And out of that increasingly small group, how many people would even care enough to want to be with me so... intimately as romance demands?" She shook her head. "No, love isn't for me, Sayori. Because nobody loves me like that."

Natsuki, so focused on expounding on the speech, had failed to notice a few things. She'd failed to notice Yang sharing a conspiratorial look with her wife, nodding toward the table with a murmur. She'd failed to notice the music shifting to something slower, thanks to Sayori's quiet one-handed signalling to Weiss. She'd failed to notice Sailor Venus suddenly fixing on them with intense, anticipatory focus.

And she had most definitely failed to notice Yuri's hands slowly clutching the tablecloth tighter and tighter with her every single word, the slowly narrowing eyes, the tenseness of her jaw.

She absolutely *did* notice when the girl slammed her palms down and stood straight, glaring across the crowd. "QROW! BOOZE ME, NOW!"

"...Uh... sure thing?" The confused huntsman held out a bottle of some sort. "What is this-?"

Yuri took the bottle, glanced at the label, nodded firmly, ripped the cork out with her teeth, drained it all in one powerful swig, and smashed it into the ground.

"...Oooookay?" Natsuki glanced at the shattered bottle, and the flower-pot wearing roomba that came to clean it up, before turning to

Yuri. "What's going on here, exa-?"

"In about five minutes that's all going to hit at once," Yuri explained brusquely. "And *you* , Natsuki, are going to be responsible for whatever happens next, got it?!"

"...Sure, I guess...? But... uh... why?"

Yuri grabbed her by the breastplate and lifted her up with her teeth clenched. " *This* is fucking why!"

She slammed her lips onto Natsuki's, hard.

For a few seconds, the pink-haired girl's brain ran a dial-up tone, leaving her oblivious to the sudden cheers of the observers, the multiple pictures Sayori snapped of the scene, the sudden shift of the music, anything other than the sudden shift in perception. It wasn't until Yuri, blushing, pulled her back, that she even managed to blink.

"...oh."

"Um." Yuri cleared her throat. "So. Yes. Um. That's why. I mean... if you're... alright with that-"

"No, I'm-I'm fine, I guess, I... really?" Natsuki managed. "It's... it's not just the wedding getting to you?"

"Well... I don't... think so. I just... you know, I always thought you wouldn't... go for it, or for me, because I'm the weird one, and if I'm coming across too strong we can not do this or maybe we should talk about this after the wedding when we're more level-headed-"

"No, like I said, it's... wow. It's not bad, just kind of unexpected. I mean sure, we'll talk later, but... we don't have to talk right now, we can just... yeah."

"Okay."

"Yes."

The two looked at each other for a moment, and then awkwardly glanced at the ground.

"...sooo, uh... do you wanna dance or something?"

"Yeah, I'd like that."

There was another pause.

"...Cause if you do, you kind of have to put me down."

"RIGHT!" Yuri lowered Natsuki to the ground quickly, wringing her hands. "Right, sorry, I-"

"It's cool, it's fine, it's... it was actually kind of exciting."

A smile flitted across Yuri's face. "Really?"

"Yeah." Natsuki smiled back, and she took one of Yuri's hands. "So... dancing. Let's go do that now."

"WOO!" shouted Yang. "GREAT WEDDING! ALL THE LESBIANS! YURI PRIDE, EVERYONE!"

Sailor Venus smirked at her. "I thought you were bisexual?"

"Doesn't mean I don't support our full rainbow sisters."

"Fair enough."

Scene 13: Boogie-Down Showdown: Set-Up

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(Sailor Moon)

(By me)

" ***MONIKA!*** " shouted what sounded an awful lot like the voice of an angry goddess. Or at least a very stern goddess. Or, at the *very* least, a very stern and very goddess-like being.

Point being, it was a tone of voice no one in their right mind would want shouting their name. Whether it was fear or magic, Monika found herself almost instantly sobered. She slowly turned to face the speaker.

Minako Aino, having exchanged her wedding wear for her Sailor Venus uniform with *all* the fixings. She looked ready to Magical Girl Warrior the crap out of some monsters. And Monika dreaded that she had a certain Green-Eyed Monster in mind…

She made no move to bolt as Minako stalked towards her, her gaze penetrating and full of otherworldly power. She truly looked beautiful and terrifying in equal measures. Monika knew, intellectually, that despite the vast difference in power between the two of them Minako was ultimately still as mortal (for a given interpretation of the word) as she was. That being said, if she didn't know better Monika would easily have assumed she was an Admin. And she had *met* a real Admin once before, or at least an avatar of one. As it was, Monika could feel the power radiating from her, and she doubted that even in her home she would be able to do a thing to defend herself.

Then, suddenly, she couldn't see Minako anymore, and then she realized that it was because Sayori had stepped in front of her.

'You little dummy,' Monika thought fondly. She put a hand on Sayori's shoulder. "Move aside, VP. No use putting off the inevitable," she said.

Sayori hesitated, but she didn't argue. She stepped to the side, and then Sailor Venus was standing in front of Monika with her arms folded.

"I was wondering when we were going to get around to this," Monika said.

"You understand what I'm calling you out for, then?" Venus asked.

"Boy, oh boy, do I ever," said Monika dryly. Then she closed her eyes, tilted her head up, spread her arms out and said, "As a great man once said, 'Smite me, O mighty smiter'."

A beat of silence, and then Venus snorted. "Damn it," she muttered under her breath as the corners of her mouth twitched. "Ahem! Monika, you have done horrible, inhumane things in service of a perverse, twisted, and entirely one-sided romance. Abhorrent enough on their own, your sins are all the more deplorable for having been committed in the name of love."

"No arguments here," Monika replied morosely.

"And under different circumstances, this would be the part where I declare your transgressions to be beyond forgiveness and promise to deliver swift and absolute justice In The Name of Love," Venus continued. "But…"

"But?" asked Monika, cracking an eye open.

"…look, kid, let's rap for a sec," said Venus as she grabbed a nearby chair, twisted it backwards, and sat down. "You've got *issues* . With a capital I. And unlike most of the evil I deal with on a regular basis, you also have a soul and what I'm told is a whole bunch of pent-up regrets. Which kind of makes you not-at-all evil, really. Now, can we agree that Love is the most powerful driving force there is? At least insofar as sentient life is concerned."

"…sure…" Monika said hesitantly, absently sitting down in a chair Sayori planted behind her.

"Well, I think so anyways, and unless a stronger Looper comes over here and disagrees with me we'll just assume I'm right, kay? Now, love has many forms and countless unique forms of expression. Love can corrupt, as you can testify, but it can also redeem. Both in giving to others, and in being received in kind. Romance is but one

love; friendship is another. And you have at least three friends who care about you enough that in the months leading up to this day they've each gone out of their way to approach me and make a case on your behalf."

Monika felt a blush creeping up her cheeks, and although she knew *exactly* where her friends all were at the moment, she couldn't find the will to look at any of them.

"So! With the understanding that your friends love you as much as they do I can't just go and condemn you for the follies of a younger and more foolish you, now can I? I'm not just a fair- *looking* love goddess, after all," said Venus with a gentle smile.

Monika could feel the pounding in her chest all the way in her scalp. Paradoxically, her toes seemed to have gone numb. *'Is…is she serious?'*

"But!" Venus's expression turned fierce again, "I also can't just let you off scot-free, either. What you did was bad enough that regretting and repenting alone aren't *quite* enough. So…"

She suddenly stood up and chucked the chair over her shoulder. Then she pointed a righteous finger at Monika. "I challenge you *to a dance-off!* "

"…you what?" Monika asked flatly.

There was some kind of localized montage-effect, and the next thing Monika knew she was standing on a wide cardboard square, up on the stage, under a glaring limelight. Sailor Venus was standing on her own cardboard square several feet away, and the background music had shifted from rock to hip-hop. Nearby, sitting behind a desk labeled "Judges" were Roman Torchwick, Lie Ren, Winter Schnee, and Jaune Arc. A mischievously-grinning Blake was sitting up in a balcony box attached to one of the many random freestanding walls Caboose had erected earlier, overseeing whatever this was with

Yang lounging against her side. They appeared to be feeding each other grapes in turns.

Monika blinked again. "No. Seriously. *What* ?"

"Trial by combat! Except I actually can't possibly hold back enough to give you anything resembling a fair chance, so we're going to breakdance instead," Venus explained. "So, if I win I get to smite you! Non-lethally, of course, because I don't wanna be the jerkwad that kills someone at a wedding. It's still going to be proper painful, naturally. And if you win…uh…I dunno. I'll give you a hug, instead? Pat on the back? Official Certificate of Absolution for Crimes Against Love, maybe? We could have Harry and Usagi sign it too, should be enough to shield you from any other Loopers you meet in the future that might have a mind for meting out justice against you. Anything signed by not one but *two* of The Seven should have some weight to it. *Either way* , after this there shall be no bad blood between us, okay? Barring any future misdeeds, you'll have nothing to fear from me or anyone else from my Branch. Got it?"

"…okay?" said Monika.

Sun Wukong did an electric slide onto the scene between the two, mic in hand, and said " *Let's get rrrrrready to RRRRRUUUUUUUUMMMMBBBBBLLLLLEEEEEE!* "

Scene 14: Boogie-Down Showdown: Resolution

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(Sailor Moon)

(By me)

Forty minutes of *epic* dancing and one non-lethal smiting later, Monika was sitting at a table with Sayori and Sun, who were both congratulating her on trying her best and putting on a damned good performance. Sun might have been flirting with her, too? Or with Sayori? Monika's head hurt too much for her to really notice or care.

Minako, back in civvies, skipped up to their table and slapped down a piece of laminated paper in front of her. "There you go, Mon-Mon. You've earned it, sport," she said spritely.

"Whhuuh?" Monika groaned.

"Your *official* Certificate of Absolution for Crimes Against Love," Minako said happily. "It's laminated~"

"…but–"

"I know, I know…but you know what, you really killed it out there. Also, y'know, you've gotten your smiting for all your crimes. So far. And I really planned to give you this all along, anyhow." Minako smiled winningly at her.

Monika smiled back, a bit strained. "Well…thank you, then, ma'am."

"Ah-ah-ah, that's *Minako* to you, you dork."

"Ri-right, fair enough. Thank you, though, seriously."

"Don't thank me, Monika. Thank your friends. And thank Blake, too, I guess. I was going to do this later in the loop to avoid bringing unwanted drama into the festivities, but Blake asked me if I'd do something about your apprehension so that you could start properly enjoying the evening," the Senshi of Love explained.

"Neat…except now I'm pretty sure I'm going to be spending the night drinking this headsplitter away," Monika groaned.

"Well that's…moderately better than drinking away your anxiety?" said Sayori.

"I've got a better idea," spoke up a new voice as someone placed a hand on Monika's head. Her headache died instantly. In fact, she felt a sudden rush of giddiness, a pleasant tingling all throughout her body, a great lightening of her heart, and the uncoiling of a knot in her stomach that she hadn't even noticed up until now. Anxiety?

What was that? What was sorrow? What even was regret? What did she have to angst over? She had three amazing, wonderful friends that adored her and looked to her for leadership. As if someone had taken a glittery highlighter to a few of her memories, she suddenly and very vividly recalled all the times Sayori had come to her room in the middle of the night to talk to her, seeking refuge from a nightmare she'd had about "the old days"; all the times Yuri had come to her with some piece of writing or art, fretting over all the things she thought were wrong with it, begging her to help her fix it while Monika patiently insisted that it was great; all the times Natsuki passed out against her shoulder while they were all watching movies all night. How could she ever believe that any of her wonderful and loving friends still hated or resented her when they were all so comfortable around her?

Monika was trembling all over as she breathed in deeply. There was a sudden clarity to her thoughts, as if someone had peeled a gauze wrapping around her brain. Slowly, she turned to face Sayori, and for once she didn't see the specter of death in her eyes. She saw bright blue eyes sparkling with excitement and infectious joy. There was normally a tinge of sadness hidden there, but not tonight. And Monika suddenly felt so overwhelmed with gratitude that she could see her friend like this. She had so many reasons to feel grateful, to be happy that the Admins had brought her back, that she could continue to preside over her literature club.

The world was a beautiful place, and Monika suddenly realized that she belonged in it after all.

"Enjoy the rest of the night, Monika," the voice called out, and Monika whipped around in her seat to see the back of a young woman with long blonde hair arranged in two round buns and two long tails, already disappearing into the crowds.

"You okay, Monika?" asked Sun, a bit awkwardly. "You're, ah…"

Monika realized she had a few stray tears running down her cheeks. "She's fine, Usagi just…does that to people, sometimes," Minako

replied with an amused smile.

Sayori, meanwhile, was just staring at Monika with the *hugest* smile on her face.

Scene 15:

(DDLC)/(RWBY)/(Little Witch Academia)

(NotHimAgain)

" *Mou ichido hurricane,* " Monika belted out, " *dakishimetai touch! Burning touch… Give me touch… Burning touch!* " Applause quickly filled the room and, flushed with effort, she bowed and stepped down.

As she walked away to rejoin her companions, another girl walked over to her. They had just been introduced earlier hadn't they? She was Weiss's sister… Diana. That was it. "That was very well done," the young witch said to her, "I enjoyed it very much."

"Are you sure?" Monika asked. "I felt like it was a little off at times."

"As I have been assured by Akko many times," Diana replied, "the point of karaoke is not doing it perfectly but having fun doing it." She smiled conscientiously. "If I wanted to get up with my sisters and dance and sing… the one "Hare Hare Yukai" song, it wouldn't matter if we did it well or not. Though the idea has taken a little bit of getting used to on my behalf."

Monika looked her up and down. Diana had been hanging out by the refreshments more often than not tonight, and what little interactions they'd had left her with the impression that she was not the sort to go in for singing and dancing. "You know the "Hare Hare Yukai" dance?" she asked. Diana shrugged.

"It was Akko's idea," she admitted. "She's… a close friend, and she's very excited for whenever everyone else starts Looping, so she's

been developing individual celebrations for each and every one of them. She talked me into learning the dance so that we could do it with Amanda… I'm sorry, you don't know who anyone I'm talking about is, do you?"

"No, it's okay—" Monika attempted. Before she could finish, Nora rose between the two like an angry poltergeist and leaned into Diana's face.

"Diana…" she said hopefully, "I can go and get Weiss and Winter *right now* , so if you'll just sit tight for a moment—"

"You were eavesdropping?" Diana squeaked.

"Not *eavesdropping* , I just happened to be passing by and overheard that you know a certain dance made famous by certain familiar people~" Nora grinned. "And isn't it more important to have *fun* with karaoke than it is to be *good?* "

"I—that's—"

Suddenly, an arm reached out and pulled Nora away from the two. "Nora, no," Ren said, lifting his wayward partner like a disgruntled kitten.

"Nora YES!" she shouted, reaching out to grab Diana. Ren sighed and swung her away.

"If I may," a new voice said, and everyone turned to see Professor Ozpin walk up behind Diana, "I can take care of this young lady. If you'll please take care of Nora?" Ren nodded and guided the offending (and somewhat offended) girl away. Ozpin turned and nodded respectfully to Monika. "Miss Monika."

"Professor," Monika replied. She heard Natsuki calling for her, and turned to find her friends rushing to greet her.

As she did so, she heard Ozpin saying "Now Miss Cavendish, let's find your sisters, shall we?"

"Wait, you too?"

Scene 16: By Masterweaver.

"Hey, Nats?" Yang waved the pinkette over. "Real talk, girl to girl."

"...Okay?" Natsuki walked over. "What's going on?"

"First of all, congrats on finally getting together with Yuri."

"Uh... yeah, that's..." Natsuki chuckled, rubbing the back of her helmet. "Yeah, that was more her than it was me, but... I might have wanted that too, and just never made a move and... we'll be talking about it later."

"Yeah, take it as slow as you want. Really, I should be having this talk with her, but she got herself plastered so I don't know if she's going to remember this, so I have to tell you and trust you'll pass on the message."

"Alright, sure. Hit me."

Yang put a hand on her shoulder. "First of all, I have long hair. Stupidly long hair. Blake does too, but I'm the one more about keeping my hair clean, right? She comes to me when she needs advice on that front."

"That's fascinating, really, but I'm not sure what-"

"And we have a very, very active sex life."

"OOOOOOOkaaaaaaaaaaaay." Natsuki held up a paw. "This conversation just took a strange turn. Why are you telling me this?"

"Because Yuri also has long hair," Yang pointed out. "Maybe even longer than mine. And, well, I obviously don't think you'll be jumping

straight to the sexytimes, but when you get there you might find some issues cropping up."

"Oh. Right, well-"

"Luckily for you-and for Yuri-long hair is common in some parts of the multiverse and some loopers have actually taken the time to write books on how to handle intimate situations with it."

"Right, I'll be on the lookout for a copy-"

"Oh no need, I've got a spare."

With a twist of her hand, Yang produced a book and held it out. The title on the spine was in japanese, but on the cover was a sensual woman, her hair twice as long as she was tall and draped just appropriately enough to serve the purpose of the clothing she utterly lacked.

"Um." Natsuki swallowed. "Wow. Yeah okay, this... this isn't just porn, right?"

"Nope. It's actual advice for intimacy with long hair." Yang continued to hold the book up, her expression completely serious. "Like I said, you'll need this at some point, so I figured I'd drop it off with you."

"R...right. Um..." With a blush, Natsuki snatched up the book and stuffed it in her subspace pocket. "Thanks, yeah. You could have waited for a less public venue, you know."

"And you and Yuri could have hooked up earlier, instead of having an overdramatic moment at my wedding." Yang shrugged. "I'm not really annoyed, mind, but I did swear petty vengeance on everyone who had big dramatic moments that interrupted the happy day, so... consider us even."

She patted the girl's shoulder and walked back to Blake. Yuri stumbled onto a stunned Natsuki and tittered drunkenly. "Hey... hey

Nazukri... whadishee wanna say?"

"Just... wishing us luck as a couple, in her own trolling way."

"Oh thashweeeeeee! WE LOVE YOU YANG! YOUSHOO BLRAKE! WOOOOOO!"

Scene 17: By Masterweaver

"Ok, girls, we need to have a talk about yesterday."

"I don't think now's a good time," Yuri grumbled. "Everything is a little loud right now."

"That is what we need to have a talk about," Natsuki said flatly. "You got drunk-and I don't mind because what happened next was pretty cool, and you've had experience with alcohol so I think you probably knew how to handle yourself. Sayori got drunk, ridiculously drunk, and sure she was fun and all but with her depression that is a coin toss."

"Oooooh, thanks Nats," Sayori grumbled from beneath the warm towel on her face. "I didn't have enough of a headache, really."

"And then there's Monika, who got high on mindmellow, crashed, got drunk, was subjected to force sobriety, got redonkulously drunk, endured terror induced sobriety, then got put through a mental-hype train by Sailor Moon."

"You know, I realize you're trying to be serious and all, but I'm really just trying to imagine us in a hug-pile," Monika mused. "With the doggos that were there. There were doggos there, right?"

"Two, the rest were wolves. Look, my point is, if you're all going to get buzzed, fine, whatever, that's your business, but at least let me know I'm going to be the designated wrangler, alright?" Natsuki rubbed her head. "I mean, I had plans for the loop-I can take the rest

of the day off to make sure you're all alright, don't get me wrong, it's just... this. All of this."

"Drink responsibly." Yuri nodded. "Got it. Ungh... I'll help you with the others, Nats, but give me ten minutes in my bed first?"

Natsuki nodded, handing her a water bottle. "Go on, I think I can handle these two."

"I wanna sing something," Monika announced. "I don't know what, but I really want to sing."

Sayori groaned. "Oooooh noooooooo..."

Natsuki sighed.

Scene 18: Smash Club 2: Bride of Smash Club

(DDLC)/(RWBY)

(By Wookywok)

It had been a good week or so since Blake and Yang had rode off into the sunset to the depths of tree-knows-where. Since then, the various guests at the wedding had begun to go their seperate ways. Some chose to scatter themselves around Remnant, some went back to their respective home planets - and one certain group of literature enthusiasts were staying relatively put, at least for the moment.

After all, there was revenging to be done that day.

"Emerald Sustrai!" Monika called out to the other end of the courtyard.

The green-haired figure turned to face her caller. "'Hey, Glitch. 'Sup. What can I do for ya?"

The club president folded her arms. "You know full well why I'm here - we've been putting this off for far too long."

"I do, don't I?" Emerald folded her arms in return. "Very well, then. Meet me in my dorm at 4 P.M."

"...AND IN THE BLUE CORNER," exclaimed Ilia, "Weighing in at... let's see, if my math's right... 328 X 10^-30 pounds in a digital world, and a lot more than that in a fleshy one, the Hopeful Hacker! The Ghost in the Machine! The Artificial Anchor! Please welcome... MONIKAAAAA SHIORIIII!"

Natsuki gave Yuri a playful nudge. "See? She gets it."

"Will Monika be able to dethrone Emerald and take back her title as Smash Champion? Or will she be sent back home, crushed with defeat? You probably already know who I'm rooting for. Natsuki probably should have gotten somebody less biased to announce."

Yuri nodded. "Yeah, probably."

Sayori stepped into the middle of the "ring" - it was actually just two chairs and a Wii U setup to a TV, but whatever - and blew her whistle. Which was actually a kazoo. Regardless, it caught everyone's attention.

"Alright everyone. As a certain meme once said, 'you know the rules and so do I.' I don't wanna see any semblances, hacking, or any other powers out there. Just dexterity and a solid grasp of the neutral game. Senpai, if you could start us off?"

"With pleasure," said Cinder, raising her mallet to the gong.

"But we're not in the game, so I couldn't hack it if I wanted to-"

GONG

"LET THE SMASHING BEGIN!"

Chapter 20

20.1 – Book Raid, by Wookywok.

(DDLC)/(Touhou)

Marisa's focus was laser-sharp as she zoomed towards the Scarlet Devil Mansion. She felt no breeze in her hair. She did no loop-de-loops or corkscrews. She made her usual Meiling-blasting quick and efficient, instead of flashy and fun. She was a girl with one and only one thing on her mind - the ultimate heist, the biggest borrow, the greatest IOU in the history of Gensokyo.

She was going to drain the Scarlet Devil Mansion Library dry.

There it was. As far as she could tell (it was Loop -variable), this window lead directly into the comically huge vault of information that lay within the mansion. She put up a magical barrier, crashed through the glass...

...and was immediately met by a solid wall of swords, knives, axes, and various other bladed implements.

"What the hell-"

Marisa's barrier met sharpened steel, and immediately burst like a balloon. The resulting force knocked the magician off of her broom, hurtling fifty feet to the floor below.

Everything went black.

"Uuuuhgn..."

The first thing Marisa noticed when she came to was that she wasn't in the same position she was in when she landed - unless she had landed in a chair and hadn't noticed.

The second thing she noticed was the voice.

"Oh good, she's waking up."

Marisa opened her eyes. The girl who had spoken, seated right in front of her, was not Patchouli. Instead, in front of her sat a teenaged schoolgirl, dressed in a slightly sexualized school uniform. The only real similarity to the library's normal occupant was the waist-length purple hair, and even then it was a different shade.

"Heh. Really threw me for a Loop there."

The purple-haired girl scratched the back of her neck and chuckled awkwardly. "Yeah. Even when I'm wide Awake, ,it's still surprising." She grew a worried look. "Sorry about that. Are you alright?"

"Nothing I haven't seen worse of. So, what brings you here?"

"Woke Up as the librarian-"

"Aw man, there go all my plans out the window." The magician considered the statement from a brief moment. "Proverbially."

The purple-haired girl quirked an eyebrow. "Plans?"

"Well, I *was* gonna... *borrow* every last book in the library, potentially permanently - but Patchy's not here to get a heart attack, so there's no real point in it."

"Oh. Is that so."

"Yep, that's the gist of it." Marisa scratched her head. "Oh! I almost forgot to introduce myself!" She held out a hand. "Marisa Kirisame - ordinary magician turned ordinary Looper, semi-professional youkai exterminator, and proud to be second strongest human in Gensokyo. At your service."

The girl sighed and returned the handshake. "Fair enough. I'm Yuri, of the Doki Doki Literature Club."

"Heh. Literature Club. Librarian. Cute. So... just Yuri? No fancy last name like 'Hakurei' or 'Knowledge' or 'Izayoi'?"

"No. Just Yuri."

"Alright, cool. So, what's your Branch like?"

Yuri's expression darkened. "Do you want the traumatizing version or the very traumatizing version? Or would you like to play yourself?"

"Yeesh. Forget I asked. I'll... I'll look it up on my own terms. Uh... changing the subject! That was quite the collection you showed off earlier, huh? Sakuya could learn a thing or two from ya."

"Yeah. Sorry again. You just sorta crashed through the window and..."

"...And you panicked, yeah. I get it. No need to go beating yourself up over it."

"Yeah, yeah. I know." Yuri looked around. "Sooo... you're here now. Anything... anything you wanna do with a Visiting Looper?"

"I was thinking maybe spellcard duel for shits and giggles. That alright with you?"

Yuri donned an amused smirk and held up a piece of paper. "Sure, why not?" And the two took to the air.

20.2 – Doki Doki Dream Club: Sayori, by Crazy Cog.

(DDLC)/(Touhou)

Each step was harder than the last, the weight of her dismay preventing her from making any progress. She was traveling somewhere, but was getting nowhere. Sayori dared not look around, too scared that an image would appear that would cause her to fall even further into darkness. All around her, she could hear whispering voices speaking out, mocking her.

"Look at the broken little girl."

"Such a shame, one could almost feel sorry for her."

"But why should we pity one as pathetic as her? She can't even help herself."

"Maybe we should put her out of her misery?"

"Did you forget? She already tried that, and no one could help her."

"She's alone."

"All alone."

"With no one to save her from herself."

Placing her hands over her ears, Sayori tried to run faster, only to feel as if she was wading through tar. Looking down, her legs had sunk partway into the black ground, which only caused her to struggle more.

"Oh look, she is trying to run."

"It's rather pointless I'd say."

"After all, dreams are the once place where you can't escape us."

By this time, wisps of smoke could be seen in the small amount of light that illuminated the area around her. They continued to circle her, getting closer and closer with each pass. Every time she tried to brush them away, a chill ran through her body, causing her heart to flutter.

"How cute, she is trying to fight."

"It doesn't matter, we all know that she will lose."

"Like she always does."

"Soon she will be forgotten."

"Like she once was."

"As is the fate of those who deserve it."

Sayori's breathing became more ragged, and her arm movements clumsier. This only served to amuse the wisps, as they soon grew larger, and each one shaped themselves into mockeries of her own face from that one day.

"I think she is close to breaking."

"Pity, I was having so much fun."

"Well, I think that there is only one way that we can end this."

The sound of a light turning on echoed throughout the void. Turning, Sayori saw a beam of light shining down upon a single chair, and a rope that extended up into the darkness.

"You know what to do."

"It's the only way."

"For you to be free."

More lights clicked on, and more chairs were revealed, until she was surrounded by them. Dull eyes focused on the chair in front of her as Sayori took step after step towards it. Inside of her, a small part screamed in warning, but it was drowned out by the seductive whispers of freedom from her torment.

However, before she could reach it, a strange sound reached her ears. To the part of her brain that was still working, it sounded almost like a jet streaking though the air.

"Ignore it."

"It's nothing."

"No help is coming."

The voices started to sound a bit nervous, causing Sayori's movements to slow a bit. Parts of her brain that were disabled by her depression started to whir back to life, although they were still no match for the crippling weight of her negativity. Finally reaching the chair, her shaking hand stretched out towards the rope in front of her, ready to tie the knot that would end this nightmare.

It was in that moment that something crashed down on top of the chair, causing it to smash into tiny pieces. In front of her stood a large sheep like figure with metal feet, a mechanical tail, and jet wings sticking out of the top. However, what was most jarring was the purple haired humanoid head sitting atop of it, horns sticking out of the sides. With a smug smile on it's face, the head spoke, "I'll be with you in a minute, I just have to take care of a few things." Jumping into the air, the sheep stayed suspended in midair as a swarm of mini sheep flew from its body, each making a beeline for a chair. One by one, they were demolished from the impacts, the lights shutting off as they broke apart. When the last light was extinguished, the large sheep suddenly broke into pieces, leaving behind a rather small girl with the same head. At this point, the wisps had started to shrink, although they could still be heard.

"This doesn't change a thing."

"You are nothing. NOTHING!"

"We will return, and when we do..."

The last voice was broken off as the sound of suction echoed throughout the void. One by one, the wisps were sucked into the vacuum in the hands of the girl, each one screaming as they were dragged into the device. As soon as the last one was inhaled, the vacuum vanished into thin air, leaving only the two of them there.

Still rather shocked from what had just happened, Sayori was barely about to choke out, "Um... who are you?"

The girl took the long cap off of her hand and did an exaggerated bow, "Doremy Sweet, the Ruler of Dreams at your service."

The literature club member's head tilted to the side, "Ruler of dreams?"

Plopping the cap back on her head, the dream intruder nodded, "Yep, kind of like that moonicorn, only much more attractive." The girl spun around before posing cutely, "Any other questions?"

Sayori's mind was swarming with multiple questions to ask, but one took priority over all the others, "Why are you here?"

Doremy's smile shrunk a bit, "Now that my dear is a good question. As ruler of the dream world, I can view any dream I wish, and change it as I please. When I saw what was going on in yours, I thought that it would be a good idea to mix things up a little." She spun upside down, although gravity did not seem to want to affect her clothes, "And to make sure that this doesn't happen again, we're going to have a little talk."

"I don't have any say in this do I?"

"Nope! So pull up a chair..." Doremy glanced at the remains on the ground before looking back to Sayori, "Actually on second thought, pull up a bed instead." Before Sayori could reply, she found herself falling into an incredibly fluffy mass. Looking around, she noticed that she was lying in a king sized bed with white sheets and fluffy pillows surrounding her. Surrounding the bed was a large green field, the short grass swaying gently in the air. The sky above them was still empty, but at least the darkness was not as oppressive as before.

However, Sayori's attention was soon drawn a red armchair, in which sat Doremy, still wearing her hat, but the rest of her outfit was replaced with a suit that matched her previous colour scheme.

Glancing over the spectacles that had just appeared on her face, Doremy spoke in an accent that Sayori could swear she had heard before, but it was so bad that she could not place it, "Now, vhat seems to be ze problem?"

After taking a few seconds for her brain to reboot, Sayori began to talk, "I don't know if you are aware of this, but I struggle with depression." After a nod from Doremy, Sayori continued, "I have been getting better lately, as my friends have kept it under control. Even in lonely loops, I have learned methods of driving it away. The only place where I am still truly vulnerable is in my dreams." Sayori's hands tightly clenched the bedding, "Here, I have no control. My powers are stripped away from me, and I can't shut the voices out of my head. There is NOTHING that I can do to help myself."

As Sayori was speaking, a pipe had now appeared in the baku's mouth. After a few seconds of blowing pink bubbles out of it, she took the item out of her mouth and spoke, "I zink I see your issue. It iz not a case of not having enough control, it iz a case of having too much control."

Confusion (and a hint of annoyance) seeped into Sayori's next word, "What?"

"Vhen you go to bed, do you zink to youself," Doremy's voice became a perfect copy of Sayori's, "I am going to have wonderful dreams tonight!" The accent returned, "Or iz it more of a case of, 'Oh, I hope that I don't have more of those terrible nightmares tonight'?" Again, the accent was replaced by Sayori's voice.

Sayori's eyes glanced downwards, "The second."

Doremy's voice had now turned back to her normal tone, "Tell me, have you ever heard of self-fulfilling prophesies?" When Sayori nodded, the Dream Guardian continued, "If you believe that something will occur, then there is a higher chance that it will occur. Even throughout the multiverse, there are examples of such things happening." A TV appeared in mid-air playing the scene from Star

Wars Episode 3 where Anakin was confronting Padme, "This is but one. The poor sap was so convinced that his wife was going to die, that he ended up inadvertently causing it." With a snap of her fingers, the TV turned into a swarm of fireflies. The small bugs flew over to the bed and landed in a circle around it. Then, all together, they spiraled up into the air, before spreading out and taking the place of the missing stars.

The next words out of Sayori's mouth were spoken slowly and carefully, "So what you are saying is that because I expect to have bad dreams, there is a greater chance that I will have them?"

"Exactly, the subconscious is a fickle thing, especially if you feed it thoughts like that before bedtime. Depending on what your thought process is, you can either have a terrible nightmare," Sayori found herself surrounded by feral rats, "Or a wonderful dream." Said rats were suddenly replaced by a pack of Pichu who proceeded to snuggle against her. Watching the snuggle fest with a smile on her face, Doremy giggled, "It might not be easy at first, but once you let go of your fears of what could happen. you might find yourself quite pleased with what does happen."

Smiling as one of the Pokemon tickled her cheek with its ear, Sayori picked it up and started to pet its head, "Thank you."

The baku's hand was waved dismissively, "Don't mention it, just remember who the true queen of dreams is alright?" A bullhorn sounded in the distance, "And that's my cue to get going. So many dreams to visit, so little time." She fished a pocket watch out of thin air, "Or is it so much time?" Grinning at Sayori, Doremy started to disappear, "After all, in a dream, it could be either one!"

Monika glanced up from her latest project as Sayori entered the room, "Perfect timing Sayori! I need your input on this new program that I am developing."

Sitting down next to her friend, Sayori gave a soft smile, "Sure, I would be happy to."

As the other awake member of the literature club sat down next to her, Monika noticed the frilly pillow hugged to Sayori's chest, "By the way, where did you get that pillow from? From what I can tell, it isn't coded like anything I have ever seen before."

Sayori's smile grew, "Let's just say that I got it from a friend."

If one was to look closely at the tag sticking out of the pillow, they would read:

Doremy's Sweet Sleep Pillow, guaranteed to help your sleep be the sweetest it can be.

20.3 – Out Of Her Depths, by Fictional Fanatic, with help from me.

(DDLC)/(Subnautica)

Perditia Awoke and immediately let her code flow, swiftly enacting a hostile takeover of whatever device she had looped into this time. Of course, she let all the regular software run as intended and disturbed things as little as possible. However, any viral programs, anti-viruses or AIs were swiftly caged and their processes frozen, letting Perditia analyze them and assess her current situation in peace. One loop too many had she suffered an early end due to faulty software, malware, AIs or other things that decided they did *not* want her inside of the system. Perditia's response was to answer in kind. Unfortunately, despite her access to her techno-psychic looper powers, Perditia felt as if she had hit some kind of wall, a mental barrier she simply couldn't penetrate which was protecting some of the code she had intended to imprison.

Meanwhile, the entirety of the Doki Doki Litirature Club had felt their entire world 'hiccup' around them, Monika already sweating as she

fought against an incomprehensible attack towards their code. Whatever it was, it went beyond just regular code. Fortunately, whatever it was, it seemed unprepared for Monika's level of skill and insight into how code worked, knowledge beyond that of just a normal Program. Even more fortunate, it seemed that the attacker soon recognized something within Monika's defenses and ceased its attack, instead sending a message through, accompanied by a ping. "Loopers?".

"I'd like to apologize once again for my hostile takeover. I'm used to having to force myself into a position of control, due to certain unfortunate loop Awakenings. I once awoke as a Bolo unit and had to fight a program that deals with rogue AI's... It would likely have nuked the entire planet if I hadn't overpowered it and torn it to shreds." Perditia explained herself, embarrassed, although unable to really convey the feeling through her current avatar.

"Ah, yes. Well, we've all been there, I suppose," Monika replied, "I remember one time I looped in as SkyNet, and I Woke Up *almost* too late to stop the nukes from flying. One of the scarier moments in my life so far, for sure."

"Hey, no harm, no foul!" said Sayori cheerfully, stepping up and grabbing the apparent-silhouette's hand, shaking it vigorously. "I'm Sayori, vice-president and public relations director of the Doki-Doki Looping Literature Club. That's Monika, our president, and the tall one is Yuri, our secretary of edge, and the short one is Natsuki, our tsundere-general. Welcome to our Club!"

Yuri facepalmed and Natsuki rolled her eyes.

"Ah, you will have to excuse me. I am rather new by looper standards. I have yet to have a hub loop, so I am unaware as to who SkyNet is, although preventing nukes from flying is certainly a good thing. So, how are things here in this loop? Is there anything particular I should be looking out for?" Perdita asks, her two-

dimensional, sea-blue silhouette standing out against everything else as there was absolutely no shadowing or depth to her existence.

The shortest girl in the room, Natsuki, pointed at Monika. "Strictly speaking, she's the only thing *dangerous* in our Loop...but only when she isn't Awake. Besides that, the main concern around here is just boredom. Y'know, your basic Groundhog Day time loop ennui. But we find ways to fill in our time."

"SkyNet," Monika spoke up, "Is a Looping AI, just like...well, the five of us, actually."

"You know that you're the only one of us who self-identifies as an AI, right?" Natsuki asked her.

"Yeah! I'm a woman trapped in an AI's body," giggled Sayori, who was walking around Perditia. "Hey, Monika? I think there's a bug in your Matrix patch this time around. Our new pal has no X-axis."

"You mean she has no Z-axis," Yuri corrected her.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Sayori replied absently. Then she frowned, "How can you tell she's a she? All we can see is a...um...she's got no, y'know...bits? She's all-hey! Natsuki, the newbie is flatter than *you* !"

"MAKE YOUR PEACE WITH GOD!" Natsuki screamed, Unpocketing a maul and throwing herself at Sayori, who jumped out of the way with a mad laugh.

While the two pink-haired girls ran around the room, Monika sighed and put on a slightly strained smile. "So! You said your name was 'Perditia', right? Do you like tea? Have you ever even had tea? Yuri, would-"

"Of course, Madam President," said Yuri with a bow and a smile before dashing away to the closet to get the tea set.

Monika looked over Perditia's sprite with a critical eye. "Hmm. Would you like me to whip up a more...expressive form for you?"

"Ah, yes. It seems I do lack an appearance. I believe I've defaulted to a two dimensional male template. I suppose a female one would be more fitting considering my voice." Perditia admitted before her shape changed together with her color, resulting in her silhouette having a clear skirt while the color changed to pink. "Actually, I believe I prefer blue." Perditia said before the color changed back, while retaining the shape.

Looking after the two pink-haired girls running off, Perditia couldn't help but fear for their mental health somewhat. After all, she was based on an AI meant to keep humans company and keep them sane, while also keeping them alive. Turning back to Monika as Yuri ran off, Perditia nodded.

"I think I'll take you up on both offers. While I have tried tea before, my experience with food and drinks is limited as I don't have much of a body in my baseline and rarely loop in anywhere with a biological body. So far, I've had a few biological loops as sea creatures in my home loop, and a few times as a Pokémon. Only once have I been human and ironically enough had to have my Anchor remind me to eat and drink. Normally that's my job." Perditia explained with an embarrassed sigh.

Monika nodded and called over to Yuri, "Pick one of the more low-key blends; she's inexperienced, we don't want to give her system shock."

"Got it," Yuri replied as she opened a cupboard, pulled out what appeared to be a small hose, and used it to fill a measuring cup with water.

"Alright, so, do you have any prefer-" Monika was cut off by a sudden, loud crashing noise. Monika and Perditia both looked; Natsuki was smashing away at everything within reach with her massive Oni club while Sayori bounced all around her on a pogo

stick, giggling hysterically. "Damn it you two, take it outside!" Monika shouted at them. Then she swung her arm out aggressively and they both disappeared. Pogo stick and all.

"Um..." said Perditia, not sure which question she wanted to ask first.

"No, they're fine. Yes, they do this a lot...well, actually, it's usually Natsuki and *Yuri* going at it, but even Sayori gets a little piss and vinegar in her now and then," Monika explained, "But don't worry, I just altered their location values so that they're in the Holodeck...the arm thing was just me being dramatic, frankly."

"The Holodeck?" asked Perditia.

""It's what we call the room that isn't *this* room or any of our bedrooms. It's just a space that I can do whatever with." Monika blinked a couple times in rapid succession, then gave a satisfied nod. "Now it's a Coliseum replication. They'll just go nuts for a while and come back when they've had their fill of anime fight scene nonsense."

"They enjoy physical altercation, then," Perditia surmised.

"Well, not exclusively," said Monika as she sat down in a chair. A few translucent light-screens popped into existence around her, which she started poking at and swiping across. "We have a very wide range of interests. See, like Natsuki said, the only thing in this whole Branch we usually have to worry about is me when I'm not Awake. There's the odd Variant with some bizarre threat for us to cope with every so often, as does every Branch, every six or seven thousand loops or so. We had to live through a zombie apocalypse in one of our earlier loops. It wasn't fun. So we started learning some combat skills. And we learned two things. The first is that even the best of friends are going to butt heads and build up tension and resentment when they're stuck together for too long with no one else but each other to interact with. The second is that the martial arts make for an excellent way to blow off some steam. So yeah, we beat the hell out of each other for fun sometimes. Sometimes we try to build a

functional giant mecha out of textiles. Dumb stuff like that. You know how it is, I'm sure. Or you will, in a century or three, if you're still new."

"Actually, I know exactly what you mean. Ryley, my Anchor decided to launch the biggest spaceship that's accessible in our baseline and then direct it back to the planet, so he could use it as a makeshift drill, to save himself some time. He ruined multiple eco-systems and angered the only other real ally in our loop, which is an ancient, psychic leviathan." Perditia said with a sigh.

"Alright, let's see how this look suits you," said Monika, creating a round mirror out of thin air and making it drift in front of her face.

Perditia looked into the mirror. She was slightly taken aback at the reflection. No longer a flat blue silhouette, she now appeared to be a three-dimensional human being. Her skin was still blue, with a smattering of purple freckles on her face. Her eyes were cyan and glowing, and her hair was short, curly, and aquamarine. She glanced down at herself, seeing that she was wearing a uniform similar to the others. Gray blazer with a red tie and a blue pleated skirt.

"Any adjustments you'd like?" Monika asked, as Yuri sidled up and handed Perditia a teacup on a saucer.

"Actually, you've done a good job with this. However, now that I actually look human, I believe I'd prefer actual skin color. It'd make this appearance more viable for use outside of this loop and would alienate less non-loopers." Perditia says, then smiles. Although, I'd like to keep the purple freckles. Makes me look exotic... Huh, didn't realize I had such a preference." Perditia spoke while looking into the mirror, exploring her own face and body both with her eyes and hands, astonished that she was now getting feedback in the way of stimulated touch.

"This is actually, rather amazing. You wouldn't mind if I keep this appearance and code beyond the loop?" Perditia asked, sounding like a child about to open a present.

"Well, I mean, if you want. Of course," Monika replied, somewhat taken aback. What an odd thing to ask, she thought. She shrugged and turned her mind to the task of adjusting Perditia's skin tone. "I imagine you'll want whatever color is most predominant in your universe. Or, seeing as you seem to like a sense of exoticism, maybe...no...no...no, way too striking...no, not striking enough...wait, I'm over-complicating this. You've already got the freckles and curls, may as well go full-ginger..." Monika though out loud as she gave Perditia a pale white skin tone and made the hair carrot-orange. Then she made her eyes a more natural shade of blue and hummed thoughtfully before making her hair fiery-red instead. She smiled. "There. Blue-eyed redhead. The rarest combination of hair and eye colors in the Hub. Doesn't get too much more exotic than that."

"She mentioned living on an ocean world," Yuri noted, "Pale skin will sunburn easily. More melanin, perhaps?"

"Fair point, Yuri," Monika admitted, darkening Perditia's skin somewhat. Then, feeling she looked a bit too small, Monika gave her a few inches of height and a few more pounds of muscle, did some body composition optimizing, extended the hair somewhat because really what could you do with hair that short?

"Um, Monika? She's, uh...I don't know if you're doing it on purpose, but she's starting to look like a...a Samoan...Amazon, kind of?" Yuri spoke up. Monika looked up from her screens and blinked in surprise at the dark-skinned six-foot tall female bodybuilder with a four-foot mane of cherry-red curls she had accidentally created.

Then Sayori and Natsuki re-entered the room. They both stared. "Monika, why did you turn Perdy into Super-Buff Redhead Moana?" asked Sayori.

"As if I needed yet another reminder of my relative tininess," Natsuki grumped.

"Long hair is actually a serious impediment in most survival situations involving hostile animals," Yuri added sagely, one of her

hands idly playing with her own long hair, "Especially so in an underwater environment."

"Right...yeah, I may have gotten carried away," Monika admitted. Immediately, Perditia shrank back down to average height, with more of a runner's build, and her hair shrank back to bob-length.

"You should make her hair darker, too. Red that bright against that skin tone makes her skin look pasty," Natsuki critiqued. Monika did so, Perditia's hair darkening from fire-red to something closer to blood.

"That's a much better contrast," Yuri agreed, "She kind of makes me think of Pele now."

"The soccer player?" asked Natsuki with a frown, "But he's a guy. And not a redhead."

"No, not *that* Pele," Yuri shook her head, "The Hawaiian volcano goddess. Sometimes depicted with red hair, because fire."

"Ooooh, that sounds cool!" Sayori squealed.

"Alright, hands off the wheel before I screw it up again," Monika chuckled as she threw her hands in the air. "So what do *you* think, Perditia?"

"Honestly, I'm out of my depth. I still don't understand human beauty standards yet, seeing as I have yet to loop in as one for very long. I believe my last and only loop as a human ended a few seconds in with a severe head injury. Trying to compile your loop memories before getting yourself strapped into a launching lifepod is not a good idea." Perditia said and shuddered, before looking confused and began inspecting her body. "Alright, that was odd. I wasn't trying to do that." Perditia said, frowning as she realized her new body wasn't entirely under her own control.

"Yeah, involuntary body things can be weird," Sayori agreed, "Like when you take a bite out of something that looks like it's going to taste like something you really like, but it actually tastes like something completely different that you don't like as much, but that you don't not like either, but you get all grossed out and stuff because it wasn't the thing you were expecting."

"Or, for a less run-on-y example, when seeing someone else yawn makes you have to yawn," added Natsuki.

"Don't worry about conforming to human beauty standards, Perditia," said Monika, "All that really matters is that *you* feel comfortable with how you look. Beauty is subjective, so anyone else's opinions of your looks are inconsequential."

"Hey Perd, do me a favor real quick," Natsuki spoke up, "Try Yuri's tea and tell us what you think, before Monika goes off on a philosophical tangent for the rest of the loop."

"OOOOOOOHHH!" yelled Sayori while Monika rolled her eyes.

"Well, for how I'm feeling, I'd say it is fairly close to what I can remember feeling a biological body feels like. I have to say, the code, and how it interacts our perception here is very interesting. Although, I do find it odd that your entire loop takes place within a singular computer... Have you ever considered leaving?" Perditia asks, before taking a sip of the tea. Surprisingly, showing that she knew how to handle drinking hot tea without burning either her tongue or lips. "Well, it certainly tastes better than I expected. Makes it a lot easier to appreciate the concept of tea, rather than thinking of it like warm leaf water." Perditia says, amused as it was yet another part of "reality" that overcame her expectations and understanding of the world.

"Oh, we've left before," said Monika, while Natsuki pulled Yuri and Sayori off to the side for some kind of huddle. "It's just that, most loops, the world outside this computer is basically just the Hub, with all the limitations that entails. And our loops usually only last for a

week or two, so we very rarely feel any need to leave the computer unless we know our game is in another Branch for a change. While my coding abilities have limits-mostly imposed by our available hardware, these days-I can create pretty much any environment we might want to visit right here in the clubroom, and the laws of physics are much more flexible under my hands. The one hard-set limit is that I don't create other AIs, so if we've been confined to our own Branch for too long we might leave the computer to...I don't know, go clubbing or some-"

"THAT'S IT!" exclaimed Natsuki from the side. "We should take Perdy out for a night on the town! She said she's only had one human loop and it lasted just long enough for her to get her brains bonked out. So let's all go clubbing!"

Perditia stared at her. And she kept staring...and staring...and staring...

"Um...Perditia? You should blink, like, at least once every...I don't know, five to fifteen seconds," Sayori said gently, "Going too long without blinking really creeps people out. You wanna do your best to stay out of Uncanny Valley."

"Oh, Right." Perditia says, blinking while frowning. "I'm used to my body blinking on its own whenever I loop in as a biological being. I'm not used to having to do so manually. I suppose I'll just make a program to assist me with it." Perditia says before changing some of the code of her avatar herself. "That should fix it. Tell me if you notice anymore issues, I'd prefer being able to use this body and have it pass for human even at a close glance whenever I project it out into physical form... I should probably also stimulate breathing and a heartbeat as well, I'd need help with those." Perditia says, trying to think of what else she might require to pass for human.

"Now, with this handled, what is it you usually do during this loop?" Perditia asks, curious as she looked around properly, using her avatar's eyes to see the world around her, instead of watching it through code like she had previously.

Monika looked around. "Well, we do a lot of reading and creative writing. We have video game tournaments, karaoke nights, dance-offs, mecha battles, Dungeons & Dragons sessions, we've started playing Remnantball recently-"

"That's like live-action Brick Breaker where everyone playing has a 'paddle' and every time you hit a ball it multiplies," Sayori explained.

"Yes, quite-"

"And in case you don't know what Brick Breaker is, that's that old game where you break bricks by bouncing a ball around with a paddle and you lose if the ball hits the ground," added Natsuki.

"Indee-"

"Except breaking things isn't an essential element of Remnantball; just keeping the balls from hitting the ground," Yuri pointed out.

"...are you all done?" asked Monika evenly.

Her friends all nodded, holding back snickers.

"Now, where was I...oh, yeah, and we can attempt pretty much any kind of physical activity in our Holodeck," said Monika, pointing at a double-set of green doors on the far side of the room.

Suddenly, Sayori whipped out a large wooden barrel with a plunger-detonator on top of it, and slammed it down between the gathered girls. Taped to the barrel was a piece of paper bearing the words, ' *Pinkie Pie's Patented Party-in-a-Barrel!* '

"GIRLS! All this yakkity-yak is getting us nowhere! We've got a week, or two at most, to show Perdy all the best things about being a person! Which means it's TIME FOR A PARTY, my glitches!" exclaimed Sayori, just before she jerked the plunger up and then slammed it back down. The barrel burst open in an omnicolored flash, to the tune of ten-thousand defiant noisemakers.

When the smoke cleared, the clubroom looked more like a *nightclub* , complete with fog machines, strobe lights, and a theater-grade surround-sound system pumping out the grooviest of jams. Also included where a fully-stocked buffet table and a literal soda fountain.

"Let's get loud!" yelled Sayori as she grabbed Perditia's hands and pulled her into an energetic dance. The other three shrugged and joined in. "And after the party, Yuri can teach you all the *really* fun stuff!" Sayori giggled.

"Wait, what?" asked a bemused Perditia before she began nursing a headache after making the mistake of looking at the code. Her attempt to figure out what had just happened just left her with what she considered impossible code, that *somehow* still worked. She decided to stop thinking about it and instead join in on her first ever party, carefully filing away the name Pinkie Pie to be considered an enemy towards all conventional code.

20.4 – Sailing At Last, by Masterweaver.

"So..." Natsuki cleared her throat. "We're dating now."

"Yep," Yuri agreed.

"...And, um... how does this change our relationship, exactly?"

"I... don't know."

The two of them stared at each other for a few moments.

"...I mean, obviously we go on dates," Yuri allowed.

"Oh yeah, that." Natsuki nodded. "Dates. Like..."

She trailed off.

"...um... eating out? Movies? Um..." Yuri frowned. "We're dating sim characters. You'd think we should know this."

"Yeah, well..." Natsuki shrugged helplessly.

They looked at each other again.

Yuri fidgeted for a moment.

Natsuki coughed into her fist.

"Oh for the love of all things cute!" Sayori stomped over to them. "Just go read a book together or cook something together, alright?!"

"Uh-"

"No Nats, you don't get to say anything until you two are on your date, which is happening right now." She pushed the two out of their chairs and started shoving them toward the door. "Monika! Load a bookstore or something!"

"This-"

"Gosh darn it Yuri, I've watched you two dance around each other for way too long, and I'll be a spambot's uncle if I let you wallow in awkwardness any longer!" She opened the door and shoved them through. "Now git!"

The door slammed on two very nonplussed faces. Sayori turned around, dusting off her hands proudly. "That takes care of that, for the moment."

Monika rolled her eyes. "Yes... I'm sure this can't possibly backfire in any way whatsoever."

20.5 – In Which Four Girls Withstand A Total Lack of That Which Sounds Similar To B, C, D, G, P, T, V, and Z, by Zum1UDontNo.

"So… What's up with this loop?" Natsuki said in confusion. "It's hard to talk, and my brain hurts."

It was day two of Doki Doki's loop, and all Doki girls, sans Monika, had sat in a group. Four pings had shown truth; all four cognizant of Yggdrasil's loop. All four girls' waking was postliminary to normal, by a singular day; Natsuki, Yuri and Sayori could fathom that Monika's form a day prior did not do anything to DDLC's programming.

"Mm-hmm," Yuri did nod, "our air, it is… odd, in our clubroom. Almost as if a… factor, not of our physical world, for lack of a good way to say it, is unordinary…"

"So it's to do with our programming," Sayori said. "It shouldn't strain Monika too much to know what's up with this loop."

Natsuki did groan. "I'm counting on Monika fixing it," Natsuki's pink orbs slid shut, hands massaging scalp. "I actually can't *do…* particular things right now. It isn't our usual 2D thing, Monika has that in control, similar to all our loops." Monika, at this point, had a habit of adjusting all of DDLC's 2D art into 3D body imitations as soon as activation of that loop.

Hiroaka paid Natsuki no mind, continuing to draw randomly in his book of blank folio. His papyrus was practically black from ink marks, not that Hiroaka could know.

At that point, Monika did walk in, frowning. "Okay, all of you," our club captain said. "I know what's up with this loop."

Yuri's noggin did tilt. "How did you know us four had just… chat about that?" Yuri said in confusion.

"Lucky assumption," Monika did shrug. "I thought Natsuki would complain about it by this point." Ignoring Natsuki's pout, Monika did add, "Now, just a fair warning: you'll probably not fancy what our quandary this loop is."

"Just… inform us of what it is," Natsuki did groan. "I can't stand my brain hurting in this way…"

"So, it's… Ah… Hmm." Monika thought for a short bit. "I don't actually know how to say this to you. As in, I don't know how to *say* it. Basically… You know our ABC's? And you know what is prior to F, but post-D? As a notion, that… mark? That mark is not in our world."

A short bit of no talking did pass.

"You can't actually… this is a prank," Natsuki said stonily. "You say I can't say-" Natsuki did stop for a short bit, and Natsuki's mouth shut. "Huh. Looks as if it is." Natsuki did frown. "Now that I know about it, it's annoying…"

"That would justify our… awkward talking," Yuri said, putting a thumb upon chin. "That charac… that *mark* is such a major part of so many words, taking it away… allows us a small amount of options."

Sayori did laugh. "Actually, it's fun!" Sayori said. "Think of it as provoking your mind into a prolific capacity. A quiz on your ability to adapt."

"That's probably why I didn't do much of anything in our past day," Monika said. "I didn't know how to do things in Python without… what's prior to F, but post-D. Ah… Our most common mark?"

"Fifthglyph," Sayori did broach. At Monika's, Natsuki's and Yuri's looks, Sayori did clarify. "What's prior to F, but post-D… Our most common mark… any way you brand it, it's our fifth glyph in our syllabary. As such, fifthglyph is a fitting word for it."

"How can you *do* that?" Natsuki did ask in shock and, though Natsuki would not admit it, admiration. "It's as if… It's as if you find it no difficulty at all! I almost can't talk as it is!"

"Wisdom, know-how and skill born from intimacy with it," Sayori did shrug. "Occasionally I find joy in giving my mind trials upon writing, or talking in this situation. Say, do not say a word in surplus of two parts of a word. Or words of only A, fifthglyph, I, O or U, pick a singular option. I'll work on that soon, I want to do that but I cannot."

Sayori took Hiroaka's book away from him and did flip to a blank folio, and put it back in front of him. Patting his arm as Hiroaka did maintain scribbling, now marking a blank folio with his black ink, Sayori did turn back to Monika, Yuri and Natsuki. "At this point, writing and talking without using fifthglyhs is child's play. I also occasionally visit a sub in hub loops that has that as its primary point of activity, AVoid5. To Sayori, a lack of fifthglyphs holds no aggravation at all."

Yuri, Natsuki and Monika all did gawk at Sayori for a long bit.

"…Sayori, allow nobody to say you hold a silly or thick mind," Yuri said firmly.

"Okay, I won't! …Say, you think anything apart from DDLC is within dominion of this, or is local to our part of this loop?"

Monika thought for a short bit. "I… don't know," Monika said. "I'll find out, just a short bit, and… Okay, I just did hack into a grid in ' *Unanimous Stations of Amarica.* ' It is touching parts of this world not within DDLC."

"Cool." Natsuki's articulation, although unhappy, did hold a small bit of satisfaction. "This club isn't solo in its pain."

"Also," Monika said, "our world is now known as 'Doki Doki Writing Club' by 'Salvato and Pals.' Not as big of a shift as I thought, although 'Salvato and Pals' sounds similar to a sitcom."

Again, a short bit of no talking did pass.

"…So," Yuri said. "What's our plan this loop?"

"Rap match," Sayori did proposition quickly.

"No," all Sayori's pals said back, almost in harmony.

"Hmph… No fun. No fun at all."

20.6 – Cosplay.

Today's club activity: cosplay as someone you idolize!, read the blackboard.

"Of all the Senshi–and I'm not criticizing you here, mind– *why* Jupiter specifically?" asked Yuri, who was wearing a Victorian era waistcoat and idly twirling a straight-razor in one hand. She was actually tricking around with it much like one might do with a butterfly-knife, all without looking at it. Her traditionally well-managed hair was all kinds of tangled and frizzed-up, and it was dyed black with a white skunk-stripe.

"She's very kitchen-savvy and a brutal ass-kicker. What reasons do I need beyond that?" Natsuki asked in turn. She was wearing a Sailor Jupiter costume, wig and all, so exactly detailed she could have passed for the real deal, if she weren't a full thirty-three centimeters too short.

"Well, she doesn't exactly fit into your…aesthetic, does she?" asked Yuri. The two of them were alone in the clubroom, waiting for Sayori and Monika to show up.

"Just because she isn't Badass Adorable in looks, which depends on how strictly one defines 'adorable', doesn't mean she doesn't fit my aesthetic," Natsuki countered, "She still fits the principle, just along a different axis. Like, I'm generally about hiding deeper meaning behind a cutesy façade and simple language. Still waters run deep and all that. Makoto is like that too, just in a different way. If I *really* wanted to drive the point across, I could have cosplayed as Optimus Prime, but that would have been way too obtuse. Sometimes I *like* being subtle."

" *Ehhh* ?!" Yuri looked bewildered now. "What do giant robots have to do with anything?"

"…y'know, 'More Than Meets The Eye'?" replied Natsuki, giving her friend a flat look. Yuri just stared flatly back at her, until Natsuki's

eyes widened. "…oh for the love of Tezuka-sama, you actually don't know the Transformers' tagline?" Natsuki asked incredulously.

Yuri just shrugged. "I'm not much for robots, to be honest."

"Yeah, and that goes for a lot of people, but *literally everyone* knows *that* , Yuyu! We're talking about a fucking ancient meme, here. The kind of thing that pop culture osmosis spreads to every corner of civilization. If I walked up to a random Romulan at a bar somewhere in the Delta Quadrant, and said "Transformers, robots in disguise", I guarantee you they would at least *know* that the appropriate response is "Transformers, more than meets the eye". Probably wouldn't say it because Rommies are douches, but the point is they'd still *know* ."

"Unlike the scatterbrained masses, my focus never wavers from that which interests me," Yuri said archly.

"That excuse won't fly this time! If you can recognize that Optimus Prime is the name of a giant robot you should–"

"Because I've *met* Optimus Prime in a bar-loop," Yuri pointed out.

"…oh. What was that like?"

"Well, he's nice and all, but a little…up his own ass, kind of? You know how those Superman and Captain America types are. They're *likable* and all, just not very *relatable* . I was much more excited to meet Godzilla, frankly."

"Fair enough. So, Sweeney Todd, I take it?" asked Natsuki. Yuri nodded. "Well, no explanation needed there." Yuri nodded again.

The door flew open, and Sayori bounced in. She was dressed as Ash Ketchum. She threw down a smoke-bomb stylized to look like a Pokéball, and when the smoke cleared Hiroaka was standing next to her in a Pikachu costume.

"Shit sprinkles!" Natsuki snapped, fishing a roll of money out of her pocket and chucking it at Yuri. "You got lucky this time, Edge."

"Luck is for suckers," Yuri retorted as she stabbed her razor into a desk and started counting the bills. "Like you, Cupcake."

"You wanna go, you gothic pig-sow?!" Natsuki snapped, jumping up in her chair and whipping out her kanabo.

Yuri casually pulled her razor out of the desk and gave it a twirl. She smiled at Natsuki and slowly stood up. "Maybe I do. Been a while since I cut up something so *cute* ."

The two glared at each other intensely for a moment, Natsuki snarling and Yuri smirking, until their eye contact was broken by an incandescent crimson plasma-blade. "Oy, vice president says: No violence and/or flirting until *after* Club Activities. Capiche?" said Sayori, her voice heavy with the Force and her blue eyes flecked with yellow.

After a moment of tense silence, Natsuki and Yuri both folded and put their weapons away, sitting back down. " *Yes, Sayori,* " they chorused.

"Good," Sayori chirped, putting her weapon away as well. "Can't say I blame you guys, though. We've all been stuck home for a few hundred loops, now. We need to see about getting a loop somewhere adventure-friendly so we can stretch our legs."

"Avatar Branch!" yelled Natsuki, "I wanna get back to training with Toph."

"Seeing Alucard again would be nice," Yuri said idly, turning her eyes to the window. "I haven't gotten my vampirism to stick yet."

"I want to go back to the Underground," said Sayori, "I haven't had a chance to spar with Undyne since I Sithed up. I wonder how her energy spears stack up against my lightsaber?"

Just then, *something* smashed up through the floor. It was a pretty strange-looking thing, kind-of-sort-of like a gilded space capsule with a pair of elevator doors in the front. The doors slid open, and out strolled Monika in an instantly-recognizable combination of beige trousers and like-colored bowtie, floral-print purple-toned vest, brown top hat worn at a slight tilt, *richly* purple overcoat, and a wooden cane. She strolled out of her elevator and into the middle of the room, where upon she leaned on her cane, crossing her ankles, and cocked a jaunty eyebrow at her friends with a winning smile.

Her friends stared at her for several seconds, until Natsuki broke the silence. "Willy *fucking* Wonka. For real?" she asked.

"My favorite character from one of my favorite 20th-century authors?" asked Monika, "Hell yes. I aspire to his level of off-beat management skills."

Sayori started clapping, and Yuri joined her. Natsuki just rolled her eyes.

"Y'know, Natsuki," said Monika sweetly, "I *could* reskin you to look like an Oomp–"

Whereupon the sound of clapping in the room doubled in volume.

20.7 – Bubbly Disposition, Eastwind of Azarath.

(DDLC)/(RWBY)

Sun Wukong looked on in confusion at the scene. While it wasn't unusual to see Sayori and Natsuki on Remnant; nor them to using their Hyper Blossom and Powered Buttercup outfits, the person they had gotten to fill the role of Rolling Bubbles was.

"Natsuki is making me do this for trying to flirt with her girlfriend," spoke Neptune as he held the bubble wand up for a pose. "Besides, I totally pull this off."

"Aren't you like... deathly afraid of water?" Sun countered, eyebrow raised.

"I'm only afraid of large bodies of water and the prospect of swimming! It's not like I am afraid of rain or something," came Neptune's retort. "Besides, these bubbles aren't even water based. "

To prove his point, he activated the bubble wand and pummeled Sun with a barrage of bubbles. Sun was, as a matter of fact, not soaking wet. Point having been made, Neptune activated his shoes and took off.

20.8 – It's a Date?, by Masterweaver.

Yuri walked up to the head desk with a big grin. "Monika! Hiiiii!"

Monika quirked an eyebrow.

"Ha... aha." Yuri rubbed the back of her head, some of her hair sheepishly tangling itself along her arm. "So..."

Monika's eyebrow remained quirked.

"Aheh... well." Two hands were brought together, the smile weakening a bit. "Aheheh..."

The hands clapped a bit, purple eyes darting to the side for a moment.

"Ah... yeah... so..."

Yuri took a deep breath.

"...Ooookay, so this is kind of a little... yeah, you know?"

"Do I?" Monika asked politely.

"Erm. I... you... this..." Yuri swallowed. "I... it's just, you know, you're kind of..."

She made a vague gesture.

"...and, you know, I'm... if I... I mean I guess, you're better at..."

Her voice trailed off for a moment.

Then she slammed her hands on the desk. "Come on, you know what this is about."

"Do I-?"

"Damn it, Monika, this is awkward enough, just-" Yuri took a breath. "I... want... you to... program... a specific location. For me and Natsuki. To go on a date."

"Oh, well, I have a whole suite-"

"This is weird, okay? I should just be able to take her out but you're basically in control of the world and you're my friend who kind of sort of killed me once and-" Yuri shook her head. "Look, can you do it or not?"

"Do what?"

"Make a plush-themed cafe for us to go to, alright? That's all I want!"

Monika smiled. "Two things: I refuse to program NPCs, so Sayori and I would have to be the staff."

"Fine, fine, make it even more awkward."

"And... I can't do it this loop."

"What? But-but why?"

"And three," Monika murmured, "two, one..."

The door to the club burst open. "Yuri!" Natuski cried, slamming a wacky hat on her head. "Come on, I've got something to show you in

the holodeck!"

"Wha-?"

Monika watched her smallest club member drag her largest one through the door with a smirk. "Conflicting schedules," she explained to empty air.

20.9 – Programming Prodigy, by Zum1UDontNo.

"Natsuki?"

"Oh, hey Monika!" Natsuki said, looking up from her laptop. Her fingers continued to type as she talked. "What's up? I'm just working on a little something."

"A little something, you say."

Natsuki nodded, grinning. "See, I was thinking, this place is cool and all, but it's too small. And the Holodeck is great, but it's not that much bigger than the clubroom. So I figured I'd flex my mind a bit and make something new for us." The girl looked back at her laptop, swore under her breath and started backspacing. "Clearly I can't look away without filling it with typos..."

Monika sighed. On the one hand, the clubroom was somewhat claustrophobic at times, and it could be fun to add in new locations. but on the other hand...

"How did you even fit this in?" Monika asked. "I don't think the game even has this much space available for something like this."

Natsuki shrugged. "Shortcuts," she said. "One of them is, as long as the walls are indestructible, I can make them only a few pixels wide and make the rest hollow. I also made a simple illusion function to make all the really long hallways and stuff only a few feet long, but feel a lot longer when walking through."

Monika gaped for a moment. "How can you even do this?" she wondered. "You learned about the nature of the game, what, two days ago? It hasn't been that long since I told you, and that's *advanced* coding."

"All the more reason to get started earlier!" the UnAwake girl stated.

'That really doesn't answer my question,' Monika thought, sweat-dropping.

"Hey-o, group! What's the scoop?" Sayori cheered as she walked in, Yuri following behind. "Me and Yuri are late, we had to stop and argue about proper silverware placements."

"I had a PowerPoint to back up my argument and everything," Yuri added.

"Haven't missed anything big, have I?" Sayori asked.

Natsuki blinked. "First of all," she said, "That first thing you said? I'll need you to agree to never say that again."

"I can't promise anything."

"And second," she continued, "I've just been working on something new for the clubroom. See the closet? It leads somewhere else now."

"Oh, a new location?" Yuri said. "Where does it lead now?"

"Well," Monika sighed. "We've got our own individual rooms, this room, and the Holodeck, of course. But Natsuki's decided to add in a new room. So the logical conclusion is that we now have a fully functional *Death Star* in our game."

There was a short pause.

"A Death Star?" Yuri asked. "To scale?"

"To scale," Natsuki confirmed smugly. "It might take a little longer to be perfect, I still have to implement the secondary gravity system and update the code on the engine actors. It's a bit sloppy."

Monika looked helplessly at the two girls. "She's been like this all morning, apparently," she said. "I'm starting to think she's Stealthing. Or this is a really weird variant."

Yuri tilted her head. "Why do you think she's Awake?"

"Because if she's not, this is just baseline Natsuki, and that's terrifying..."

20.10 – Just Tripping Along, by Wookywok.

First day of loop? Check.

Full set of pings? Check.

Not a raincloud in sight? Checkeroo.

Having already pocketed Hiroaka, Sayori straight-up *marched* to the clubroom, ready to induce some wacky fun-filled shenanigans for her and her clubmates. Yes, this loop was gonna be a *good* loop.

The Smiling Lord of the Sith herself all but kicked open the clubroom door, took a single step-

-and immediately tripped and faceplanted.

"I'm okay!"

Okay, so it wasn't the kind of dramatic entrance Sayori had been hoping for. No problem, though. She got back on her feet, took another step -

-and tripped and faceplanted. Again.

"I'm still okay!"

A familiar pink dot buzzed around Sayori's head. Upon getting in front of Sayori's face, it transformed into a small pink bat, still airborne.

"Yeah, a little late to warn you," Natsuki deadpanned. "Floor's *super* - slippery this loop."

"It's not slippery," stated Monika, who was currently equipped with a jetpack. "If it were slippery, it wouldn't have as much traction. It's more like the floor has a trip function that triggers when someone's feet touches its collision box." The club president sighed. "And like so many inconveniences in the loops, I can't do a damn thing about it."

Yuri was currently floating above the ground using... well, some sort of magic, Sayori didn't know what. "So I suggest you get yourself off the ground somehow."

"Got it." Sayori unpocketed a yo-yo and tossed it upwards. It magically affixed itself to the ceiling, and when Sayori grabbed it, it transformed into a full-sized tire swing, tossing her into the air in such a way that she landed straight into a sitting position in the middle of the tire.

Natsuki nodded. "Impressive. But how are you gonna move around?"

"I'll... I'll think of something."

20.11 – Just Another Base Conversation, by Masterweaver.

"Sooooo Yuri." Sayori slid in with a sneaky smirk. "Have you gotten to fifth base?"

Yuri leveled a flat look on her.

"...Okay. First of all, the 'base' metaphor is highly variable and dependent on knowledge of baseball or similar sports, so don't ever

use it again."

"Got it."

"Secondly..." Yuri took a breath and let it out slowly. "I... won't deny I'm not curious about that aspect of my relationship with Natsuki, but... well, we are just starting out, and we do have quite a bit of baggage. And, frankly, I'm not entirely sure I trust myself not to go too far if I'm leading down that path."

"Ah, I see. Reasonable." Sayori nodded sagely. "So you're waiting for Natsuki to make the first move?"

"I'm waiting for Natsuki to ask about the subject at all," Yuri admitted. "We're still nervous about kissing, let alone... well. And..." She rubbed her arm awkwardly. "You know there's a reason I like sweaters."

"...You know... we are digital entities," Sayori pointed out gently. "You don't... have to have scars."

"...Scars are real," Yuri said quietly. "Scars make me feel... grounded. Sensation without consequence... that's dangerous. I know Natsuki's not comfortable with that, though, so... like I said, I'm going to wait until she broaches the subject. And it's not like this is about that, that's just a fun part of the whole thing, not even the core."

"Right, I getcha." Sayori shrugged. "Well, at least you're FINALLY dating."

"Yep." Yuri gave her a sly grin. "And what about you? Any girl catch your eye?"

Sayori frowned at her. "Stop that."

"What?" Yuri asked innocently. "I was just asking."

Compiler's Commentary:

20.1: Yuri, you know I love you, but you're a spoopy librarian :S

20.2: Where can I get a pillow like that?!

20.3: Credit for the idea goes to Fictional Fanatic. I just helped them with dialogue for the Dokies.

20.4: *Smashes a bottle of champagne against the *S.S. Natsuri. **

20.5: *Wordless, yet wildly enthusiastic, standing ovation*

20.6: *Sigh* …I miss Gene Wilder.

20.7: I mean, it's progress? I guess?

20.8: What Yuri didn't mention was that the *really* awkward part is that Sayori insists on wearing a fake moustache when she gets to be the waiter.

20.9: When Yuri shared the events of this loop with Natsuki, she was simultaneously proud that her Unawake self could out-program Monika, and yet furious that her Unawake self could out-program *her* .

20.10: *Mumbled muttering from the floor*

20.11: Sayori's just covering her bases, here…

Seeking Paleblood

Message from the Compiler: So, this is something that SpaceBattles member Solracdragon started last February. It didn't make it into Keluvax's compilation, and when I took over I decided I wanted to keep Fused Loop multi-snip series together in their own chapters; that's what Keluvax said she would do with Masterweaver's "Flesh and Blood" DDLC/Azumanga Daioh series, so I decided to compile it that way, and it seemed to me to be a reasonable precedent. So, as y'all can see, that's what I did, both with Masterweaver's "Doki Doki Huntress Team" DDLC/RWBY series (still on-going) and my "Killer Glitches" DDLC/Mirai Nikki series. And Solracdragon went so long without updating this (since March, specifically) that I kind of…forgot about it. Solracdragon also hasn't been seen in the Infinite Loops neighborhood for a while, and I'd hate for all you Compilation Readers to miss out, so…

Here's the first, and hopefully *not* ultimately the only, installment of Solracdragon's DDLC/Bloodborne Fused Loop series, "Seeking Paleblood". Hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have ^_^

Chapter 21 - Seeking Paleblood

(Doki Doki Literature Club)/(Bloodborne)

(By Solracdragon)

Part 1

The sound of coughing echoed in the currently empty room. It continued for a few minutes before settling down to merely heavy breathing. The source of the cough lay on a table, feminine in form, clad in dirty travelers clothing, and with a hand clutching her chest as she tried to push past the pain of her most recent fit. She was no stranger to pain, but there was definitely a difference in the pain of having a disease run rampant through your body and that of a blade

cutting through your flesh. Soon enough the pain passed and she lay down on the table, both reminiscing on how she had gotten to this point and waiting for the man to finally arrive.

The loop started out as a fairly unique one, all things considered. Seemingly set in the Victorian Era, she grew up on the alone. Whether her parents had died before she was old enough to comprehend, or abandoned her for some unforeseen reason, she never knew. Still, the small village that she grew up in was in was nice enough. And while she never was adopted from the orphanage, she did still make herself useful enough to the caretakers of it that she was offered work there. All in all, the loop was pleasant enough and she was happy for the time of relaxation, even if doing without the technology she was used to took a while. Of course, things didn't stay relaxing for too long.

Even now she wasn't sure how exactly it started. It could have been a traveler passing through town, an animal having been caught and not properly cooked before eating, or any number of other reasons. But a plague struck the little town she had lived in, hard. For months she watched as people she knew died as the plague consumed them, unable to help even when others started to listen to her strange advice on how to stop the spread of it. Sure, the advice was born from looping into much more advanced times, but enough of it was applicable to the current time that it should help. It didn't for some reason, and soon enough she to caught the strange plague, though for some reason it didn't progress in her as fast as it had others.

"It must have been for this," she mutters to herself, still waiting on the Minister to arrive. This being her impending treatment, something that would cure her disease. Paleblood, is what it was called by the strangely cloaked man who had passed through what was left of her town. She thought it was a medicine at first until he explained further. A city, Yharnam, which was built around the use of blood to heal their ailments. Anything and everything could be cured through the use of the fantastical blood treatment, all under the purview of the Healing

Church. Of course, certain blood was more effective at healing then others. And with how far along the plague would be in her by the time she arrived, only Paleblood would be enough to cure her.

With that in mind, she gathered her meager belongings and left the dying village she had grown up in. The journey was long, boring, and painful as the plague progressed, but she eventually made it to the city. Of course, as she arrived she found that getting the Paleblood wasn't going to be as easy as she hoped. All around, people were retreating into their houses, lighting incense as they went. It took some time to finally get a solid answer as to what was going on, and it filled her with despair. A Hunt, they said, was going to be happening tonight, and near everyone was retreating to their houses to stay safe for the night. The Healing Church wouldn't be able to help her until Dawn broke, and nobody would take in an outsider on the night of a Hunt. What a Hunt was, she didn't get a solid answer to, other then that it would take place in the very streets of Yharnam.

Not wanting to be caught up in it all, as she still had yet to find a combat style to suit her after that Zombie Apocalypse loop, she tried to seek some sort of shelter for the evening. Then, whether by chance or the fate of the loop pushing her in the direction, she came across a strange old man. He approached her in a wheelchair while she was in the midst of a coughing fit. Telling her that he had something to help her, he gestured for her to follow. With no other real options, she followed the best she could while coughing, not really getting a good look of her surroundings as she did so. She soon enough found herself in a darkened room that could only be a treatment room, and was told to wait. Before he left fully she did manage to get out one word, a word which caused him to chuckle as he left.

The sound of the door opening caused her to open her eyes and watch as the figure wheeled himself in. A plastic bag was in his hand, which he soon hooked to one of those metallic stands that hospitals used to hold blood and other medicines for transfusion. After hooking it up, he turned to her fully, though still keeping his distance.

"Oh, yes... Paleblood... Well, you've come to the right place. Yharnam is the home of blood ministration. You need only unravel its mystery. But, where's an outsider like yourself to begin? Easy, with a bit of Yharnam blood of your own... But first, you'll need a contract."

As he finished speaking, approaching her prone form while doing so, he set a piece of paper and charcoal on her stomach. Reaching down to look it over, she found it written in some language that she couldn't truly understand. The only part that she truly recognized was where she should write her name. Sighing heavily, and resigning herself to whatever this loop had in store for her, she scrawled her name on the blank line. *Yuri* .

As her name was signed, a sharp feeling made itself known in her arm. As she looked to see that the man in the wheelchair had stuck a tube into her arm, one connected to the bag of blood that was on the stand next to her.

"Good. All signed and sealed. Now let's begin the transfusion. Oh, don't you worry. Whatever happens... You may think it all a mere bad dream..."

As the blood began to flow from the bag into her form, Yuri's vision began to darken, and her body grow heavy. Time passed, that much she was sure of, though how much she couldn't say. Some form of consciousness began to return to her as the sound of something stepping onto the wooden floor echoed in the room. Turning to her left, Yuri's eyes widened at the sight of a large wolf like creature rising from a pool of blood. Unable to move her body, her fear grew as she watched the creature approach her. Bracing herself for being cut to ribbons as the claw started to approach her face, her ears suddenly hurt as the sound of screaming echoed through the room. She watched with amazement as the creature somehow caught fire and fled from the room. Heart hammering in her chest heavier than just before she would stab herself in her home loop, Yuri felt herself calm down.

The calm however, was quickly shattered as she felt something else on her body. Looking down, she watched with wide eyes as pale white fingers began to appear from underneath the table, and hoist something onto her body. Many small pale, white creatures began to hoist themselves up and cover her over. As she felt her vision began to darken, the sweet embrace of unconsciousness beginning to overtake her, Yuri did hear one more thing. A soft feminine voice washing over her.

"Ah...You've found yourself a hunter."

Part 2

Eyes fluttered open gently as Yuri awoke from her slumber. Her sleepy mind took a moment to catch up with everything before her eyes widened and began to look around her surroundings. Everything seemed, normal, for lack of a better word. Granted, she was waking up on a medical table in what she was now realizing was likely not the most sanitary of locations, but nothing seemed out of place. There was no large werewolf looking thing rising out of a pool of blood, though were those floorboards broken when she first got here? And there weren't numerous small white, things, reaching out from beneath the table and crawling all over her. Taking a moment to look herself over, a stark realization made itself known.

The pain in her chest, a result from the plague she had contracted, was gone. Taking an experimental deep breath, and smiling when she didn't have a coughing fit, soft laughter began to leave her throat. "I suppose I must have just been dreaming, or hallucinating I suppose." It made sense to, given that there wasn't really any pain when that man, the Blood Minister, hooked her up for the transfusion process. Looking around, a slight frown makes its way onto her features at not seeing him around anymore. The door out of the room was open, so it was entirely possible that he was waiting outside of the room for her. Not wishing to waste any more time than normal, she begins to make her way out, only for a rather fresh looking piece of parchment to catch her eye.

Looking it over brought a frown to her face, though it wasn't from the message entirely. It was more from the fact that it looked to be written by her, the font being the same that she normally used. "Seek Paleblood to transcend the hunt. Why on earth would I write this. No, when did I write this?" Speaking in little more than a whisper, her mind races at what it could mean. She knew that she needed Paleblood to cure her disease, that wandering man had said as much. But she was already feeling better, and didn't that Minister say that she would need to seek it as well? And then there was the mention of the Hunt. From what she understood something of the sort would be happening here in Yharnam tonight, something she had no intentions of participating in. So why would she want to transcend it?

Questions filling her mind, and many things not adding up, she decided to speak with that Blood Minister. Surely, he would have some more answers for her. Heading towards the open door to the room, a sense of unease fills her at the sight beyond. It didn't lead to another room, but to stairs that went downwards. Stairs, that someone in a wheelchair really had no way of getting up. Taking a deep breath to steel her resolve she descends the stairs, the sense of unease growing as she begins to hear a very familiar sound. Sure, she had only really heard it once before, but it was an easy sound to place. The sound of bones crunching and flesh being torn apart slowly was something one got very familiar with when one was being eaten by zombies. Slowly and carefully so as to not make a sound, Yuri enters the next room. Eyes scanning about for any sign of the living dead, they widened and her face paled at what she saw instead.

Just like from what she had assumed to be her nightmare, there was a large werewolf like creature in the room. Given the very visible burn marks all over it, it was probably that same one that had tried to eviscerate her in it. Back turned to her, and crouched over devouring some poor soul, it hadn't noticed her yet. Slowly, even more so then she did on her approach, she begins to make her way back up to the room she had awoke in. There was another door in there after all, so

hopefully she could escape this place through this. As she moved, her mind couldn't help but grasp the situation she was in. That, could only be what this so called Hunt was trying to kill. And the fact that so many people were gathering for it likely mean that there were more of those beasts around.

Reaching the room she had woke in, she moves to the door on the opposite end. Trying it, a soft groan of anger escapes past her lips. "Locked, of course it would be locked." Taking another deep breath, Yuri places her back to the locked door and thinks about her situation. The plague not killing her as fast as it had others, the mysterious man telling her of a miracle cure in a far away city, said city practically going into isolation for the night for some sort of Hunt, managing to find someone who could treat her with the miracle cure, having what she assumed to be a nightmare that probably wasn't, and finding a strange note written in her own hand. Really, only one conclusion could be reached when one put it all together. "I'm being railroaded. This loop is actually forcing me to participate in this Hunt."

Maybe it was doing it for a reason, Yggdrassil itself trying to help her find a way to fight. Or maybe it was just poor luck, after all she wasn't exactly a stranger to railroading in the loops. An Unawake Monika certainly did a lot of it. But this, was a bit much in her opinion. The loop hadn't dropped her into the care of someone with experience to teach her, or even give her a weapon to use. Even a knife of some sort would be appreciated at this point, something that this supposed clinic seemed to lack based on a quick search. "I suppose I could wait here for someone to find me. But the odds are more likely that the beast down there will come up here looking for more food." And she did not want to be eaten, not again at least, the first experience of it was more than enough for her.

Steeling her resolve, a simple conclusion came to her mind. Either she waited up here for the beast to either come and search her out, or she took the fight to it and went down fighting. And, at the very least, if she were to die fighting it then she could tell everyone in her

next loop that she at least didn't die a coward. The only question now, was how was she going to fight it? Using her bare hands would be more suicidal then she acted in her baseline. Trying to pry off a blank of wood or break some glass was better, but could cause enough noise to bring the beast to her early. A book, as much as she might like them, was out as well. Which, really, only left the stand that was used to hold the blood for the transfusion. It was a bit larger than the mostly decorative weapons she had in her pocket, but hopefully the added length would help.

Lifting it up, and finding it was surprisingly light, she takes a few practice swings with it before nodding in satisfaction. "Well, this is it." Taking another breath to steel her nerves, she begins to make her way down to the room the beast was eating it's meal in. Given that the sounds she was hearing were more along the lines of crunching rather than that of flesh tearing, it was nearly done with it's meal. Slowly approaching it, taking steps mainly when it crunched through a bone so her steps went unheard, she was soon within striking range. Taking a moment to gather her strength and deliver a powerful blow, her eyes widen when the creature's head perks up and one of its eyes locks with her own. A cry of fear and desperation leaves Yuri's lips as she plunges her improvised weapon forwards, piercing the beasts flesh and causing a spray of blood to soak her.

A howl escapes the things lips and it falls somewhat prone. Somewhat stunned that her desperate attack worked, but quickly shaking it off, Yuri pulls the stand from the beast and readies herself to deliver another blow. The beast however, is fast to recover, and turns towards her and lashes out while she is mid swing. Both attacks make contact, hers with its head and causing it to fall back. It's attack however, is more devastating. The top of her weapon hits the ground as one hand flies to her chest, which now sports three deep gashes from where the creature's claws tore into her. Pain, filled her being, far more than even that of being eaten alive. But with the pain came something else, something familiar. As blood escapes her lips, a soft gasp of pleasure leaves as well.

It was definitely less then she normally got from cutting herself, but it was there. It was something that she worked with everyone else to stop, and indeed progress had been made. But was it really so wrong, especially in a situation like this? It wasn't like she went out of her way to cut herself as much as she did before after all. What was so bad with having a little pleasure to dull the pain of dying. Smiling despite the blood pouring out of her mouth and wounds, she watches as the beast begins to rise up, looking ready to pounce. Her grip on her improvised weapon tightens, both hands moving to it. She was going to die here, that much was certain, but hopefully she could at least kill this thing in the process. As it leaps at her, maw wide and claws bared, she rises her weapon up like a spear right at its approaching form.

The sound of metal sinking into flesh, a dying howl, and something heavy hitting the floor echoed through the room. Pinned beneath the dead beast's body, Yuri can't help but smile. She had done it, she had killed the beast. Sure, it had killed her as well, but that was beside the point. As her vision begins to darken, and the familiar embrace of death comes over her, she can't help but wonder what would have happened had this loop been different. What kind of training could she have received here if she had the chance? Would it be enough to participate in the Hunt that was going on, or even to be useful in later Loops? So many unanswered questions filled her mind as her vision darkened, and unknown to her, her body faded away.

Part 3

A strange, yet pleasant, scent filled her nostrils as she felt herself come to consciousness. The strange scent was comforting, something she could almost compare to that of a mother's tender embrace. Though it had an unusual, almost supernatural feel to it. Still, regardless of what the scent was, it was definitely a welcome one. As she lay on what could only be described as cobblestone, Yuri began to review what had most recently happened while she awaited her new Loop memories to hit her. After all, having her chest

torn out by what could only be described as a werewolf tended to bring an end to one's life, and Loop.

Seconds turned to minutes as Yuri lay there, awaiting her new memories. And while she was very much able to be patient compared to some of her fellow Literature Club Loopers, the sensation of laying on cobblestone combined with the pressure being applied to her chest from being flat on her back was most definitely testing it. Opening her eyes to at the very least get an idea of where she was, a two things quickly became apparent to her. The almost cloud filled sky with a full moon, brighter and closer then any she had seen before, gave wherever she was an almost mystical quality to it. While it was a very calming sight, and one Yuri felt she could simply bask in forever, another fact soon made itself apparent.

While it lacked the gashes and blood in it from having her chest ripped out, she was very much able to tell that she was wearing the same clothing that she had literally just died in. Sitting up quickly, she began to check herself over. Making a habit of getting to know her body whenever she actually had one, it only took a short time for her to come to a conclusion. "I don't know how it's possible, but I'm alive. Given the lack of scaring, I'd go so far as to say I never even fought that beast. Just what is going on?" More curious then anything now, Yuri began to examine her surroundings, trying to find a clue as to where she had ended up.

A fog filled the area, though it did not obscure her vision in the slightest. What looked to be a small house stood atop a hill nearby, two set's of stairs leading up to it. Various tombstones lined the stairs leading up to it, one of which had candles lit in front of it. A life-sized doll, dressed in somewhat regal looking clothing, sat on a small landing nearby the stairs directly in front of her. And what could only be described as a birdbath stood in an alcove between the two stairs. From what she could see, the rest of the area was fairly unremarkable, a looping path that brought her right back to where she was. The fact that she could see large pillars in the distance,

rising up from only fog, assured her that she was not in any place natural.

While there was no immediate threat, Yuri still moved cautiously as she began to approach the building. While the stairs directly in front of her did seem to lead to the main entrance of the building, the strange white pools that didn't seem to conform to the stairs itself did give her pause. Not wanting to risk a trap of some sort, she chose to instead travel up the side stairs towards the building. The graves she passed didn't seem to have anything written on them to identify who or what they were meant to represent, so she only spared them a passing glance.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she took note of the small area to the side before a voice made itself known. "Coming in from the side door when the front is open, is it caution you exercise? Or do you simply endeavor to catch an old man off his guard? No matter, come in no harm will be done to you here." Having frozen at the sound of the voice, a very faint blush worked it's way onto her features as she processed the words. Was she really that paranoid that she ignored common courtesy? Entering in slowly, and readying an apology, Yuri took a moment to look over the source of the voice.

What was obviously a wheelchair was the first thing she could see, followed shortly by the old man's gaze as he looked over his shoulder at her. Something in his eyes made her uncomfortable to lock gazes with him, though she couldn't be sure exactly what it was. The small, gentle smile on his face didn't really do much to ease her discomfort either. "So, you are the new hunter eh? I'm sure that you have plenty of questions, but allow me to introduce myself first. I am Gehrman, a friend to Hunter's like yourself. And this is the Hunter's Dream, a place that you can consider a home or place of respite for the time being."

"A-Ah, it is a pleasure to meet you Gehrman. My name is Yuri, and I do apologize for coming in through the side. Things have been strange for me lately, and I suppose I used caution over common courtesy. I promise that it will not happen again."

Chuckling slightly, Gherman waved a hand dismissively. "Worry not, I am not angry at your actions. In fact, your caution speaks a great deal about your character. A cautious hunter is a living one after all. Nervous as well given that you aren't meeting my eyes. Don't worry though, I am not offended. We did just meet after all. So how about you just ask your questions and I shall do my best to answer them. Though time is short, you do have a Hunt to get on with after all."

Questions raced through Yuri's mind with each sentence this Gehrman said. Was she really so obvious in her demeanor, was he really not offended with her, what did he mean she had a Hunt to get on with, how much time did she have, and what exactly was this Hunter's Dream? So many questions, and apparently a very limited time frame to gain answers. If she really could only ask a few questions, then the most important one's were quite obvious to her.

"I, do not mean to offend you but could you tell me why you keep calling me a Hunter? I have no true experience in combat, so I doubt I will be able to do much in this Hunt. Speaking of which, what exactly is this Hunt? I heard the citizens of Yharnam speaking of such a thing before, but this is clearly not there. And lastly, where is here exactly? I have never seen a place like this, it almost doesn't even seem real." The words left her mouth at a fast pace, only a slight amount of thought going into them. While it wasn't something she would normally do, time was apparently of the essence. Still, the quick and blunt nature of her questions did bring her a bit of embarrassment, something she tried to hide by examining her surroundings.

Surroundings which, didn't really have all to much to it. There were empty cabinets that looked like they were mean to hold vials of varying sizes. A large chest sat towards the main entrance, as well as various pegs on the wall that looked like they were used to hold items. A table rested against the wall next to her, various tools and the like resting on or around it. What could only be described as an alter was nearby her, though whatever was meant to be on it was clearly absent. And various piles of books lay scattered about,

something that irritated her more then she would express. Any further observations were cut off as Gehrman spoke up once more.

"My my, curious as well. That is a dangerous thing to have for one such as yourself, though I do not blame you for it. As to your questions, all of them have fairly easy answers. As I said before, this place is the Hunter's Dream. It is quite literally a dream, somewhere that you can find respite when the waking world gets to be to much for you. Try not to think more of it then that however, the answer is not something you need to worry about. As for the Hunt, it is what those people were speaking of. Terrible beasts are roaming the streets of Yharnam tonight, and it will be up to you to slay them. As for why you are a Hunter, that is something that again you do not need to think about. Just know that you were chosen for this role, an honor truly."

Wheeling himself forwards towards the main doors, and gesturing for Yuri to follow, which she did with some slight reluctance, he gestures to the staircase. "As for combat experience, that is something that will come with time. Simply take the tools of the hunt in this workshop that you feel would be best suited to you, and go out and do some beasts. Trust me when I say that it will do you some good. And when you feel weary from your hunt, simply return here for respite. And feel free to use the Doll as well if it should please you." Giving Yuri a slight smile, Gherman gestures towards the strange white pools on the stairs.

While she had quite a bit more questions, Yuri knew a dismissal when she received one. Feeling Gherman's gaze follow her, she slowly approached the closest pool, only the slightest of gasps escaping her lips at the figures that emerged from it. They were easy enough to identify, she got a close look at them when they were crawling all over her body back at the clinic after all. She should have expected to run into them sooner or later, though at least this time they didn't seem hostile. In fact, they almost seemed to be trying to appease her, if the objects in their hands were anything to judge by. Guns, were not something she was particularly familiar

with. Preferring a blade over a firearm, she still had yet to learn how to really use one. Still, the strange expression on the creature's, as well as Gherman's gaze on her back, gave her enough indication that she should probably take one of them.

A small one, much like a handgun, or a large one that had a large opening on the end that reminded her of a trumpet were her two choices. Another of the creature's was holding what looked to be a pouch that seemed to be filled with glimmering silver looking bullets, which were probably the ammunition for the weapons. With the choice between something large and something small, the pick was obvious. Taking the smaller gun from the creatures, as well as the pouch that went with it, she watched with some fascination as they sunk into the ground and disappeared. Fastening the pouch to her waist, she took the gun in hand and got a feel of it. Strangely enough, it felt more comfortable in her left hand then her right, something even she knew was unusual when it came to guns.

Holstering it on her side, she approached the second strange puddle, her eyes examining the Doll as well as she got close. Even from a distance, it was apparent that the Doll was well cared for. The lack of any form of filth, the near life-like appearance, and the quite nice looking clothing were all giveaways that it was taken care of. Though, given the comment that Gherman had made, it was entirely possible that there was another reason it was so well kept, one she was not willing to explore. And given the slight shiver that ran down her spine as she thought of it, one that she didn't want to even think about either. Approaching the second puddle, her eyes widened slightly in glee at what the strange creatures offered her this time.

They were definitely weapons, that much she could tell, though only two of them seemed to have any form of blades to them. The cane was the oddest member of the bunch, given that it really didn't have much use as a weapon. Sure, she could bash things about with it, but that definitely seemed more like Natsuki's thing then her own. Which left her to the other weapons, one of which she guessed she would have to take if she wanted to leave here. The axe definitely

caught her attention, the edge of the blade looking quite sharp and easy to use to cut things. It's handle was strangely bulky however, possibly to bulky for her hands to wrap around fully. That, and an axe was quite a heavy item to carry around. If she was being forced to fight things, then tiring herself out quickly would not be a wise idea.

Which left her with the last weapon, something very odd to be honest. It's blade, or what she could see of it, was much like that of a saw, serrated down the full length of it. The what could only be bandages wrapped around it did raise some questions in her mind, though the strange mechanism that connected it to the handle raised more. The handle as well was odd, being long enough to run a little more then the length of the blade and curving with it. Still, despite the strangeness of the weapon, it was small enough that it likely wasn't heavy, which meant she could fight with it longer. And, the serrated edge of the blade would definitely help if she had to fight anything like that werewolf again. Mind made up, she took the weapon from the strange creature, watching as it sunk into the ground with it's fellows.

Swinging the weapon around in the air a few times to get comfortable with it, she looked back up the stairs towards Gherman, who was still smiling at her. "Now that you have your weapons, you can truly begin your hunt. Go to the gravestone with the candles lit, and focus on the last place you awoke, from there things will become more clear." Again, the dismissal in his voice was clear, the gentle tone of it not really hiding it. With questions still burning in her mind, Yuri made her way to the mentioned grave and began to focus, thinking of the strange clinic she had woke up in that started this whole journey. With how intense her focusing normally was, it would be no surprise that she didn't even realize her own body was fading away into a white smoke.

Part 4

Realization that she was no longer in that strange place overcame Yuri rather quickly. Of course, it was rather easy to tell the difference between the locations. One of them was in front of a gravestone in a

strange place, and the other was with a hand on what looked to be a lamp post on the floor of a fairly familiar place. Standing up fully, Yuri took a moment to look around and confirm her suspicions. Outside of the addition of the strange lamp post, this place seemed to be the first floor of the clinic she had awoke in. Taking a precautionary look into the room in front of her to confirm that there was not another werewolf waiting for her, a soft sigh of relief escaped her lips at it's lack of presence.

While she could go forwards and see what lay beyond there, and probably get on with this Hunt, there was another change to this place that drew her attention. The door at the top of the staircase, that led to where she first awoke, was closed. The likely hood of someone having stumbled into this place with the werewolf dead and barracaiding themselves in there was high, as was the chance that whoever had locked the door that led deeper into this place secured it further now that it was no longer being used. Either way, Yuri's curiosity was peaked as she began to climb the stairs.

Checking and making sure the door was locked, which to her slight relief it was, she lightly knocked on the door in hopes of a response. To her immense relief, the sound of footsteps coming from the other side of the door soon were heard. Shortly after, a feminine face appeared in one of the gaps of the door. Looking Yuri over, a slight frown made it's way onto her face before she spoke. "Are you ... out on the hunt? If so then I am very sorry, but I cannot open this door. I am Iosefka, the owner of this clinic. My patient's must not be put at risk for infection. I know that you are on this Hunt for us, and our town, but I am sorry. Farewell, and good hunting."

Not exactly expecting promptly being shut down, Yuri remained stunned for a moment. Idly noting that this Iosefka had yet to leave the door, she gathered herself before speaking up. "I understand that you must keep your patient's in mind, so I will not impose on coming inside. If you could answer some questions however, I would be quite grateful. My name is Yuri, and while I am indeed on this Hunt, I have been dropped into it rather unprepared. If you cannot offer any

assistance, then I understand." Yuri watched Iosefka's face, or what she could see of it, consider her words.

"I can not sense any deceit in your words, so I suppose that I can help you in a small way. Ask your questions and I will respond as best I can."

Smiling slightly in relief, Yuri ponders only briefly before starting with her questioning. "I suppose my first question is, what exactly is this Hunt? If I am to participate in it, then knowing what it is would probably be wise."

"You truly do not know do you? I suppose this one is easy enough to answer. The Hunt is a means to cleanse the streets of Yharnam of the beasts that infest it. While Blood Healing is capable of curing wounds and delaying disease, it is sadly not a complete remedy. Some people succumb to a sickness, one which fills them with bloodlust and that slowly transforms them. Before to long, only beasts remain, and they must be put down to ensure that no one else succumbs to the disease."

Frowning heavily at the information, Yuri supposed it made sense. She had been looping long enough to know that Lycanthropy was something very real, and very dangerous. It sounded like it was especially prevalent in this loop, and that no one could control it when transformed. While it did unsettle her greatly to know that she was going to essentially be killing people, it was at least easy to rationalize. If they were such a threat, and no cure was available, then killing them really was the only option. It would be just like that Zombie Apocalypse loop, only from the sounds of it she would have some help in this one. "Okay that makes things a bit more clear. I guess my next question is who is in charge of this Hunt? And where do I go to find out where I can best help?"

"Ah, that is a bit more tricky of a question to answer. Technically the Healing Church is in charge of the Hunt, though they are also closed on the nights of one. From what I have heard, the Church does have specific Hunters out there that you could probably identify by their

garb. Other then that though, the masses generally gather in large groups to Hunt down any beasts they find. You might be able to join a group. Though, and do forgive me if I incorrectly assume, you are a foreigner yes? If so, then they are not likely to let you join their hunts, my fellow Yharnamites can be quite unwelcoming to those not from here."

Well, there went her plans to hunt in a group, at least initially. Maybe if she could find one of those Church Hunters, or prove that she was capable, she could have some help. For now though, it sounded like she was alone. At least she had a general destination, which was really her original destination in this all. "The Healing Church then, I suppose I have a location to go to in mind now. Thank you for the information, it has been most helpful. I think I will take my leave now though, so that you can return to your patients. I ... hope you don't mind if I return here should I have any further questions?"

"Of course not, it is one of the least things I can do to help. Though, I do have this as well. I hope you do not become injured enough to need it, but hopefully it will help." A small hand slipped through one of the openings in the door, a vial held in it. Carefully taking it in hand, Yuri looked it over, noting the strange yellowish mixture inside. "It is my special formula, highly refined to help cure more grievous injuries. It takes some time to make, but I can supply you with it every so often. Once again, I wish you luck on your Hunt, Yuri." Hand retracting behind the door once again, the sound of soft footsteps echoes once more, leaving Yuri alone with her thoughts.

Looking the vial over, she gingerly placed it in her pocket. If this small vial could help her if she became injured, then it was welcome indeed. Softly thanking the now gone Iosefka, Yuri descends the stairs once more, and moves onwards. Passing through the room that she fought that werewolf in, a curious frown at the lack of a body left behind by it. The blood on the ground still looked quite fresh, a small pool of it even bubbling slightly. Doing her best to avoid the blood, she continues forwards through the halls of the clinic, before finding herself at a door once more. Finding it unlocked, she opens it

to the fresh air of outside. The small courtyard had definitely seen better days given it's worn down appearance. Seeing what looked to be a person by one of the statues, she rushes over to check on them.

The smell as she approaches is enough of an indicator as to the person's fate, and the sign of a large gun in hand indicated he was likely a member of the Hunt. While a part of her wanted to go inside and tell Iosefka of the man's fate, she knew that nothing could be done for him. The silver glinting coming from his hands revealed themselves to be bullets on closer inspection, the same kind that the strange creature had given her. A grim determination in mind, she bends down and slowly opens the dead man's hand. "I am sorry for this, but if I am to survive and help others do so as well, then I have to take these. I will let someone know that you are here so that you can be put to rest properly." Placing the retrieved bullets into her own pouch, she gently closes the man's eyes and proceeds to the gates.

One of the two seemed to lead into a small graveyard, likely for those who perished in the clinic, while the other lead to the streets itself. Pushing the gates open, and cringing at the loud sound they made while doing so, Yuri enters the streets of Yharnam proper. Looking around, the sight of crashed carriages, coffins of various kinds, and a dead horse were the immediate sites. Thankful that she had not eaten anytime recently, as she would likely be seeing said meal. At the very least, the path forwards seemed obvious, though the light of a torch did seem to indicate the presence of someone ahead. Quietly approaching the area, Yuri's eyes looked over the large gate. Far to large for her to climb, and the lever visible on the other side of it seemed to indicate that she wouldn't be heading that way.

A man was wandering up and down the street to her left, a torch in one hand and an axe in the other. He seemed to be muttering to himself, though Yuri couldn't tell what he was saying. There looked to be another lever on the street, and glancing around showed a ladder that would lead to an area above. With nowhere else to really go,

she had no choice other then to confront the man. After all, the gate was incredibly loud from opening, so a ladder dropping down would probably be worse. Stepping out from behind the cover of the carriage, she clears her throat to get his attention. "I'm sorry, but would it bother you if..." Any other words she was about to say were cut off as the man let off a roar at the sight of her.

Charging towards her with axe hefted high, he was thankfully far enough away that Yuri was able to evade the attack. Another attempt to speak was cut off even quicker as he tried to close the distance, swinging his axe at her wildly. What was worse was that his howling seemed to have awoken two other men that were sleeping at the far end of the road. And given that they were going for their weapons as well, it wasn't likely that they were friendly. Things were spiraling out of control fairly quickly, and she doubted she would be able to evade three people attacking at once. ~I only have one option, well two but I'd rather not take the second,~ she thinks.

Grabbing her weapon from her waist, she waits for the man to finish a swing from his axe before lashing out herself. Slashing quickly at the man's extended arm, Yuri bites her lips as the attack strikes true. Watching the axe fall to the ground from the man's now heavily damaged arm, and ignoring the howl of pain that he gave off, her attention soon turned towards the two now on the approach. The shift in attention cost her as the man she believed disabled stuck his lit torch into her side, bringing a cry of pain from her lips. Being burnt, was most certainly not as pleasant to her as cutting herself. Lashing out instinctively with her weapon, another howl of pain echoed through the streets. Looking to her side, Yuri's face paled at the sight of the man who attacked her.

He had dropped the torch from his uninjured hand to grasp his throat. Given the blood that was flowing between his fingers, and the blood on her weapon, it was clear what she had hit when she lashed out. While her attention soon had to shift to the other two men approaching her, she did overhear his last words. "Damn beasts..." Not having time to contemplate that with her new assailants, she

brought her pistol up quickly. Her other side was hurting, so evasion was less likely, but she didn't think she could stand here and fight, not without killing another one of these men. Hastily aiming for the legs, she pulls the trigger and winces at the loud crack and cry of pain that followed. One of them was on the ground, weapons beside him as he grasped his leg, while the other was closing fast.

Not enough time to load another shot, Yuri brings her weapon to bear, ignoring the blood that coated the blade. The man had what looked to be a cleaver in hand, and was swinging it more swiftly and wildly then the axe wielding man. Doing her best to evade, and taking a few cuts in the process, she backs away and waits for a moment to attack. When he stops to take a breath she moves quickly, swinging rapidly towards his limbs in an effort to avoid causing fatal damage. Her plan, as rough as it is manages to work, and his cries of pain soon echo through the street as well as he falls to the ground, defeated.

Breathing heavily as the adrenaline courses through her veins, Yuri quickly turns the struggling men over, making sure the injuries aren't fatal. While her own injuries strangely weren't bothering her anymore, the ones she inflicted on the men seemed to be enough to take them out of the fight for the time being. After making sure that they wouldn't attack her, her eyes trailed to the dead man's body. Swallowing heavily, she speaks up. "I-I am sorry that I had to do this, b-but you attacked me first. I am a Hunter like you all and only wished to pass. There is a clinic just up ahead, that I am sure you can go to to be healed. A-And I am sure you can put your friend to rest as well, or at least put him somewhere safe until this Hunt is over. I... I am sorry." Turning from them quickly, and doing her best to hold herself together, she pulls the nearby lever and watches the ladder drop down.

Climbing the ladder easily, which shouldn't be really possible with her injuries, she reaches the top with no issues. Deciding to check her injuries to distract herself, a frown appears at the lack of them. Sure, her clothing was damaged where she had been attacked, but the

flesh beneath was smooth and unmarred. With the realization that she healed from such injuries so quickly, came the realization that the other man didn't. He didn't heal from what she did, from her reckless attack that split his throat. Her weapon and some of her clothing was still dyed red from his blood. Slowly Yuri collapses to the ground, leaning heavily up against the fence as her face pales. He was dead, dead, dead, dead, dead, dead. He wasn't coming back. She had killed someone, someone who wanted to protect others. She was a killer, a murderer. It didn't matter that he wasn't significant in the grand scheme of things, of the Loops. She had still killed someone, dyed her hands red with blood that wasn't her own or that of some monster.

As Yuri slowly curled in on herself; face pale, tears streaming down her cheeks, and her own downwards spiraling thoughts consuming her, she didn't realize she was being overheard. The man inside of the house nearby listened to the soft sound of crying just outside of his house. Based on the sounds of combat he had heard just minutes before, it wasn't hard to guess what had happened and what kind of person was outside. He would wait until the girl had cried herself out before speaking up, hopefully offering words of comfort to her that could help her.

Another figure watched from a top of a nearby building. An always shifting form cloaked in shadows, it glanced briefly down on the crying girl before slowly fading away. It was impressed at how quickly she responded to the threat, but disappointed in her reaction afterwards. She was new to it, all of it, that much was obvious. While there was a slight bit of recognition in her form, it decided to think on it further later. It had plenty of time to think after all, and time to plan as well. It would keep an eye or few on her, watch her grow or wilt. If she grew well enough, then maybe it could make use of her. It always thought that they could use a new member after all...

Chapter 22

22.1 – Demogra-fics, by Masterweaver.

"Watcha readin' there?"

Natsuki sighed. "I have made the grievous error of attempting to read fanfiction of us from the hub."

"Oh?"

"Specifically crossover fanfiction. I thought I'd go see how much Harry Potter crossover fic we have." She gestured at the screen. "Three stories on Fanfic, three stories on AO3, and all the ones on AO3 are mass-crossovers, so..."

Sayori settled in next to her. "Why were you interested?"

"It's just... Harry Potter is the cultural nexus of modern fanfiction, right? The fandom from which the concept exploded. You can generally tell how popular a franchise is by how many crossovers it has with that. This, though..."

"To be fair, we're kind of in entirely different genres," Sayori pointed out. "Harry Potter is a fantasy slice of life adventure series set in Britain. We're a pseudo-Japanese dating sim horror game with a sci-fi twist. Kind of hard to mesh us together."

"I mean, sure, but... there are four of us, and four houses. Where's the fic where we're attending Hogwarts? I know it's cliche, but you'd expect at least *one* like that..."

"Hey, our popularity is our own. We don't need to hook off the Potterverse to be incredible."

"Yeah..." Natsuki chuckled. "I guess you're right. And Harry's one of the original seven."

"Yeah, we might get to see Hogwarts in person one day!"

Natsuki shrugged. "Yeah, I guess it could be neat..."

22.2 – Nats-icle, by Boohoooo!

(DDLC)/(We Bare Bears)

It was an average day in the Bears' Cave as they did some sweeping. The Dokis were currently visiting, getting fed by Ice Bear, except Natsuki, who was exploring.

"FUCK!" She exclaimed, stubbing her toe. Ice Bear gave an uncharacteristically overdramatic gasp and covered Chloe's ears, dragging her off.

3 days later…

"FUCK!" Chloe exclaimed after falling and scraping her knee. Ice Bear's eyes narrowed...

Back at some Random abandoned school, Natsuki was eating a cupcake when Ice Bear busted the door down, freezing her.

"...Geez..." Monika sighed, going to get a chisel.

22.3 – "Zombieland Saga Review" starring Yuri and Natsuki, by Masterweaver.

"...well, just... wow." Natsuki whistled. "Here I thought I wouldn't like this, but... damn."

"I mean, I went in expecting something different too. It's not that I don't like this though," Yuri assured her quickly, "I just thought it would be more my flavor and it turned out to be yours."

"No, I get it. The cutesy stuff-that's more me and Sayori. And the humor was spot on all the way through."

"It was certainly a remarkable piece of satire," Yuri admitted. "Did you notice how it switched from constant comedic near-failures to stressful but ultimately successful situations midway through?"

"Hey, yeah, that was a thing. I think that was when the characters started reaching out to each other-I mean, besides Sakura, she was always doing that."

"Yes... you know, for such a niche work, they tackled a number of issues remarkably well."

"What, the whole thing with Lily?"

"Well, that, and Sakura's depression and Reiko's motherly worries and, hmmm, the whole arc with Ai dealing with her legacy... it was always respectful, saying what needed to be said, without being brazen to the point where it ruined the story."

"Yeah." Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, I get where you're coming from. This is... I mean I went in expecting that you would be hugging me, when all the cute girls got eaten by zombies. But then the cute girls were the zombies and everything took a wild turn and I thought, crap, I'll like it and she'll... not hate it, but-

"Not my cup of tea?" Yuri suggested with a sly grin.

"Yeah, that's about it. Damn. Date night anime went way off the rails." Natsuki leaned into her. "In the best way."

"Yeah." Yuri wrapped an arm around her. "So... should we show this to the others?"

"...It'd definitely be something Sayori would like. Monika... eeeenh, Monika's got her zombie phobia... I dunno. Let's wait a bit on that."

22.4 – Swish, Swish, Stab, by Masterweaver.

The *vwmmm* of swinging lightsabers cut through the air.

"Okay, so you've got a mastery of the weight," Sayori said with a nod. "Now what you need is to keep in mind the Floating Point principle."

Yuri frowned. "What?"

"Like, this whole beam?" Sayori gestured at her own red blade. "It is death. I know this, but it takes a bit to retrain the instincts. Part of my brain says 'if I turned the flat of the blade like this, I can grab it to prevent it going in my face.' And with your knife thing, I'm guessing part of your brain is thinking 'I can control the pressure of the cut.' That's not how lightsabers work. You might know that in your head, but your instincts are going to bungle it."

Yuri looked down at her own purple lightsaber. "Right. Yeah, I see what you're saying. So... point it away from me until I've internalized No Touchy."

"That's about the gist of it." Sayori punched a button, and the holodeck changed. "So we're going to play a little Beat Saber for you to internalize that."

Yuri looked down the glowing path. "Um..."

"Beat Saber, Hub-world VR rhythm game. Got Monika to program in the specs. Slice the cubes as they come."

A bunch of black cubes, glowing with purple markings, suddenly started flying toward Yuri to the sound of digital rock. She shrugged, swinging her lightsaber along the way. "Perks of being a digital entity, I guess."

"VR's real easy," Sayori agreed.

22.5 – Monika's Fifth, by Awesomedude17.

"Lou Bega has been ruined for me." Monika declared.

"Why?" Sayori asked.

"Simple." Monika pulled out a radio and pressed start.

"A little bit of Monica in my life."

Monika turned it off. "Take that song and apply that to the twist of our game."

The Literature Club collectively winced.

22.6 – The Price of Tempting Fate, by Awesomedude17.

"You just had to mention sexy Bowser, didn't you?"

"I said I was sorry, Natsuki. How was I supposed to know about that Super Crown thing?"

"And now we're bad Sonic OCs. Thanks a lot, Monika."

Yuri and Sayori couldn't help but chuckle a little.

"I mean, I'm glad your's is worse, Monika."

"How? Your OC is just a lazy recolor of Amy, changing her skin to peach."

"You're telling me, overdesigned red and black OC with purple eyes."

"At least I put effort in my OC."

Yuri and Sayori doubled over in laughter.

"Glad you both are enjoying this." Natsuki said dryly.

"Sorry but... A deal's a deal, girls." Yuri spoke up.

"Yeah yeah." The two grumbled.

22.7 – Father-Daughter Time, by Zum1UdontNo.

"Well, looks like it's time to go," Natsuki said. "It's actually kinda strange being able to say that, considering… y'know."

Monika checked the internal clock of the game- which seemed to be less of a traditional dating sim this time, and actually operated on real time with real locations. They all even started out with 3D models. "Yeah, just about. Or, well, the equivalent of it anyway. You're the only one that actually goes home, now that I think about it."

"Yuri and Hiroaka leave too," Natsuki pointed out.

"Well, yeah," Monika said, "but she's Unawake this loop. And we both know Hiroaka doesn't really count. Me and Sayori basically just set up beds in the clubroom."

"Yeah, normally I'd stay too," Natsuki said. "There's just something really good about this loop, and I don't want to miss any of it. See ya tomorrow!"

As Natsuki rushed out of the door in a literal pink blur, Monika rubbed her chin in thought. What was she so excited about this loop, anyway?

…well, she'd just have to ask her tomorrow. No chance of being able to catch up to her at this point.

Natsuki grinned as she ran home, a faint trail of pink following behind her. She had originally been a little suspicious of this loop. Generally, whenever there was a big change to the game's genre or mechanics, it was less than exciting. The FPS ones seemed cool at first, until she realized it was basically just them with guns, and a few scripted faceless baddies. The Holodeck could make a lot more exciting stuff than that any time. The action adventure ones at least had a new landscape to explore, but it was usually just the neighborhood and maybe some forests and mountains.

And the less said about the survival horrors, the better.

But this one was actually pretty alright. The idea was the player would interact with the girls in real time, choosing various dialogue options for any given situation. It might've also been a VR game, but it was difficult to tell from their perspective. And without a player controlling him, Hiroaka had been less than helpful in determining the answer. The main differences were the 3D bodies- which Monika normally gave them anyways- and the day and night cycles, which was new to the game. Monika hadn't added it in before, because she hadn't felt the need; for the most part, Monika just made it look like nighttime when they went to sleep and like daytime when they woke up.

But the best part of the change had come as a side detail. Since the game was taking a more real-time approach, that meant the player had the option of choosing a specific activity to partake in with their choice of waifu. And some of those activities involved getting to know the girls on a more personal level.

And for Natsuki, that included meeting her family.

Natsuki finally reached her house, and threw open the door. "I'M HOME!" she called, taking off her shoes.

"Cupcake, welcome back!" Natsuki watched as a man walked into the living room, his flame-red hair folded in a ridiculous comb-over. "How was your day at school? And, more importantly, did they like our apple crumble?"

"It was good, Pop," she answered happily. "Sayori and Monika loved it, of course. Apparently Yuri doesn't really like apples, though. But she appreciated the thought. Said it was 'surprisingly sweet' of me."

Natsuki's dad snorted. "Everything you do is 'surprisingly sweet' to her," he said. "You sure you're not actually dating her and not telling me? Do I have to get my Intimidating And Disapproving Father Face on whenever she comes over?"

"That's enough snark out of you, mister," Natsuki scoffed good-naturedly. "I didn't come here to be shipped with my clubmate. Right now, her and I are *friends* ."

"I'm sure you are, Cupcake," he chuckled, mussing up her hair. "Now, we've got a few hours before we gotta deal with supper, and I for one have had a boring day at work. What're you up for? Baseball, anime, total annihilation at Mario Kart?"

"I'm leaning toward that last one," Natsuki said. "It's been too long since I've gotten to kick your butt."

Pop leaned back, placing a hand on his chest. "My, such confidence," he gasped. "How will I ever fare against an opponent this sure of herself?"

"You won't," she shot back, grinning mischievously. "You're gonna lose. Big time."

"Oh, is that so? Because when I suggested annihilation, I was kinda implying that I would be doing the annihilating. But, if you want to face off against the Comeback Captain again, be my guest."

"Ha! The Feline First-place Finisher never stands down to a challenge, and your blue shells mean nothing to me! Bring it on!"

"Blue shells are such garbage."

"I'm just saying," Pop said, stretching as he stood up, "you get better items when you're further behind. Why do you think I let you hit me with that red early on? I could've blocked it."

Natsuki pouted. "We were playing Mario Kart, Einstein," she said. "Not seventeen-dimensional chess."

"It never hurts to have a strategy. Now," Pop turned to her, "Whaddaya want for supper? I was thinking seafood linguine, but I'm

taking requests."

"With the mushroom sauce?" she asked. "Cause the mushroom sauce is normally the best part."

"If I weren't so proud of the sauce, I'd be offended," her dad smirked. "Linguine it is. I'll call you up when it's ready, okay Cupcake?"

"Can't I help?" Natsuki asked. "You know I like being in the kitchen… Maybe I could just make some dessert items while-"

"The fridge is overflowing with dessert items, Natsuki!" Pop laughed. "If you make any more we literally *will not have space* for them!"

"Then let me help with the linguine!" Natsuki said. "Shredding the Parmesan, keeping an eye on the water, I could do the fiddly side stuff while you do other stuff. C'mon, let me have this!"

"Alright, alright," Pop smiled. "You can help out. I swear, you've gotten a lot more insistent on helping me out this week."

Natsuki was silent.

"…Ah, right," he realized. "I forgot about that. Mmm." He paused for a moment, before rubbing his daughter's head. "Sure, you can help me out. Tell you what, I'll get started on the sauce and you can work on the noodles. Sound good?"

Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, sounds good."

"Then what are we waiting around for?" he laughed. "That linguine isn't gonna pop into existence from wishful thinking! Food trumps talk, so start up the cooking and we'll really get talking!"

"This enough Parmesan?"

Pop looked over at the small bowl Natsuki was holding. "Eh, I'd say a little more. Might as well go all out this time."

"I'm sorry, my teacher," Natsuki muttered, putting down the bowl and holding the cheese and grater above it. "But, just this once… I must go all out! Secret Chef's Technique: Forest's Shredder! *Haaaaaa!* "

Pop looked at Natsuki as she began wildly shredding the cheese, an eyebrow raised. "Is that all you can summon forth?" he scoffed. "Behold, witness the true power of an ancient master of the culinary ways! Secret Chef's Technique: Blades of Time!" Setting all his vegetables in a line, he raised his knife up high before rapidly bringing it down. Before long, he had a small pile of chopped vegetables sitting on the cutting board.

"A technique well performed," Natsuki solemnly nodded. "It seems we are at an impasse. We will get nowhere from idle chatter, so for the sake of this task, let us put aside our animosity, just this once."

"Very well." Pop bowed to Natsuki, who bowed in return. "You were a strong foe, and I look forward to the next day our blades clash." Rising back up, the man turned back to the stove. "Alright, the noodles are cooking, the sauce is made, the shrimp and scallops are all ready… All we really have to do now is wait."

"How long until they're ready?"

"I'd say about five minutes more." Pop dipped a wooden spoon into the pot, stirring it around. "Maybe six, but that'd be pushing it."

"…"

Pop looked at his daughter. "Something on your mind, Cupcake?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's just…" Natsuki looked up at him. "Do you really believe me? About… you know…"

"The time travel thing?" Pop asked. Getting a nod in response, he shrugged. "Well, to be honest… I'm not entirely sure. The whole

thing is pretty far-fetched. Wasn't there a manga with this exact concept?"

"Probably several," Natsuki said. " *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* , *All You Need is Kill* … It's not just manga and anime either, there's *Groundhog Day* too."

"Huh, maybe it's more common than I thought," Pop rubbed his chin. "Either way, all this talk of Yggdrasil, and Admins, and Anchors and Awakeners and dating sims and all these other terms you threw around… it's a bit hard to believe, honestly."

"That's basically what I expected," Natsuki admitted. "Any reason you're humoring me, though?"

Pop rubbed the back of his head. "Well," he said, "there are two possibilities. The first is that you're playing a prank on me. If that's the case, this week is basically just an excuse for me to spoil you rotten. And the second…" He exhaled through his nose in what wasn't quite a sigh. "The second is that it's true. And that means you don't get this sort of thing very often at all."

Natsuki nodded. "My dad in baseline is kind of a jerk," she said. "Although, since the loop is originally a dating sim, he's usually less of a person and more of an abstract concept. I'll go into his area of the house and nothing will happen, but I'll leave with the vague feeling of 'I got yelled at by my dad.' It kinda sucks."

"I can imagine," Pop said, before stopping himself. "Well, no, I really can't imagine. I've never experienced anything like that. I can sympathize, though. …Assuming this isn't a prank, at least. But, if this isn't a prank, I just have one question."

"Go on."

"If you come from this multiverse, and this is the first time you've met someone like me, wouldn't that make me a complete stranger to

you? Wouldn't you be less willing to be so close to me, since you've technically known me for less than a week?"

Natsuki thought for a moment. "It's… not quite that simple," she said. "Every loop, things are usually the same and nothing changes. But if something does change, either because of a variant or a fused loop, we get these 'loop memories' to help sort it out. They kinda tell us what our previous self knew before we Awakened." Natsuki gestured to her father. "With you, my normal memories don't know anything about you. But my in-loop memories keep telling me you're my father, you're to be trusted, you care about me. And honestly, neither set of memories is more or less important than the other. In the end, it's still me. And if half of me trusts you, the other half can too."

Pop thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, I can see that," he said. "Even if you didn't know me after Waking Up or whatever you said, the part of you that was still Asleep still knew me."

"Not quite how those terms work," Natsuki chuckled.

"One more question," he said, ignoring her. "Do you think there's any chance that I'll start 'looping?' Or will I just fade away?"

Natsuki's laughs abruptly died, and she looked away. She paused for a long while, before sighing. "Honestly, it would be great if you started looping. But, since you're not part of the base loop… You're probably not going to. This is the first time you've *existed* in tens of thousands of loops, so I… I wouldn't get my hopes up."

"Ah."

The air between the two was a bit somber for a moment, neither wanting to look the other in the eye. After a few seconds, Pop clapped his hands. "Well, let's not worry about that now," he said. "Those noodles should be just about ready to come out, so let's get dinner started. Sound good, Cupcake?"

"…" Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, sounds good. Thanks, Pop."

"Don't thank me!" Pop laughed. "You did a lot of the work, you know. All I did was the sauce and the linguini."

"Which is more than half the work," Natsuki retorted, a faint smile on her lips.

"Oh, don't give me that," Pop countered, beaming widely. "We all know the seafood is the star of the show here, and that was all you!"

As the two continued their banter, Natsuki kept smiling. Maybe he would go away when the loop ended, and she wouldn't see him again. And yeah, it sucked.

But maybe she should just stop worrying about that, and enjoy what time she had. He would go away when the loop ends, but the loop wasn't ending yet. She still had a bunch of time to spend with her father.

Feeling overall happier, Natsuki walked forward to help her father.

22.8 – Sweet Drinks, by Awesomedude17.

"Why didn't you tell me that there was sweet booze?" Natsuki demanded.

"You mean fruity drinks?" Sayori replied.

"Not talking to you Sayori but no. Liquor that tastes like chocolate. That exists."

"It does?" Monika said with surprise.

"So you didn't know?"

"Natsuki, when I drink, I tend to go straight for the hard stuff and well... that only happens when I A) have the opportunity and B) am suffering mental trauma. Why would I know about chocolate flavored booze?"

"..." Natsuki looked over at Yuri.

"Don't look at me. I'm a wine girl."

Natsuki sighed. "Whatever."

22.9 – The Doki Zone, by Wookywok.

Yuri quietly cleared her throat. "A young girl named Natsuki, searching for a moment's respite in her hectic life. Normally, this would be a simple escape into the world of fantasy, a brief period in which one could focus on imaginary problems instead of their real ones. But this girl? She does not escape. Instead, she is forcibly dragged into the depths of - **The Doki Zone.** "

"Monika, did you move my manga? No, wait, here it is."

"Indeed, mankind has many problems. But when we tear back the curtain of panic and uncertainty, sometimes we find those terrors were never there to begin with. Or maybe they've just filed themselves under M for Manga in - **The Doki Zone.** "

22.10 – A Mystery That Won't Go Anywhere, by Awesomedude17.

(DDLC)/(Call of Duty: Zombies: Aether)

"Strange... very strange." Monika remarked.

"Anomaly in the code?" Sayori replied.

"Four of them, and they're basically full-fledged AIs in some sort of survival game that's running alongside this one somehow. I could bring them in if they agree to it."

"Okay. On one hand, we don't know who they are. On the other, they're probably not going to kill us given that we've got out of Loop powers." Natsuki said as she activated her Aura. "Yuri?"

"...If they're armed, disarm them when they come in."

"Alright. Sending them a message and... well we got a message of agreement, two that could be summed up as either or and one that is enjoying his predicament too much, and considering that the term maggotsacks has been thrown around, I'd say zombies are involved so..." Monika took out a shotgun, opened a portal and ran into it screaming like a banshee.

"Well I'm staying put." Natsuki bluntly said.

Not 10 seconds had passed and Monika came in with four men. After closing the portal, Monika stopped her screaming and sighed.

"About time we got away from hellpigs. Vodka time!" One of the men spoke up.

"Of course," Another replied with disgust.

"And I was having so much fun. Thanks for dragging me along, Richtofen." The third said with sarcasm.

"It was a tactical retreat, Dempsey, you dummkopf. Now then, where are we?" Richtofen replied.

"I do not know, but Nikolai is going to do what Nikolai does best." Nikolai replied.

"Drink?" Dempsey said as more of a statement.

"Well, also nap, but yes." Nikolai began to chug vodka.

"This was probably a mistake." Natsuki remarked.

"Maybe," Monika scratched the back of her head.

"First time repeats, and then the fabric of reality tears up to bring us to schoolhouse." Dempsey groaned.

"Okay you four, has time been repeating for you?" Monika asked.

"Well yeah. Good thing too. Unlimited vodka!" Nikolai raised his bottle.

"More or less. The voices have been silent for a long time for some reason. Probably started after we met our younger selves." Richtofen explained.

"Oh yeah. Heh. I was a looker." Dempsey grinned.

"The cycle has been running, broken yet whole. Is this correct?" The unknown man spoke up.

"Kinda, Mister..." Yuri droned off.

"Takeo Masaki. This is Edward Richtofen, 'Tank' Dempsey and the ugly Russian Nikolai."

"Nikolai Belinski, and fuck you Takeo."

"We have been... how you say... confused as fuck about our predicament."

"That's understating it. Monika, blackboard time." Sayori spoke up.

"Right." Monika took out a blackboard. "Okay, today, we're giving a lesson on Yggdrasil. It's required learning."

"Oh, but Nikolai does not want to go to school again. Last teacher reminded me too much of sixth wife. I remember she drowned in pig slurry. Is disgusting."

"The wife or the teacher?" Dempsey asked.

"Yes,"

"Ahem... like she said, this is required learning. Sit down, please." Sayori said cheerfully.

"Ugh. Fine. At very least I figure out what is happening."

"Ja! It would be nice to know." Richtofen sat down enthusiastically, beaming smile plastered on his face.

"Okay, welcome to the multiverse, gentlemen. Let's start off with the basics." Monika took out a yardstick.

"So, do you understand now?"

"Yep. This tree's fucked and now we're being put through the ringer. Problem is that none of us knows who this Anchor is. Sure as hell ain't Richtofen or Nikolai." Dempsey looked over the two.

"Admittedly, given the predicament, it's probably one of our younger selves. Probably younger me." Richtofen rubbed his chin.

"Dunno. Younger Nikolai gave our Nikolai an earful."

"I do not like him."

"Clearly, you hate yourself." Takeo replied.

"Pff. Whatever."

"That probably doesn't make sense unless they're way more different than you four." Monika scratched her chin.

"Well unless we see them again, we won't know." Richtofen shrugged. "I suggest we stay here. Apparently Samantha hasn't been able to find us here."

"Oh yeah. Why is little girl not sending hellpigs here?" Nikolai asked

"Gee. I don't know." Monika said as she repeated deleted any attempt of a zombie rush from coming into existence. "Maybe she simply can't reach you?"

"Fine by me. I'm actually pretty tired." Dempsey yawned. "I think I'll hit the hay."

"Good. Night night." Nikolai laid down and fell asleep.

As the four zombie killers collectively agreed to rest, Natsuki and Yuri walked up to the sleeping Russian.

"Okay, is it a bad thing to say that he smells like fermented farts?" Natsuki pinched her nose.

"No. It's the truth." Yuri pinched her own nose.

"Yeah, he's probably going to need a day of baths." Monika said.

"Yeah, let's get him out of here before he stinks up the place." Natuski grabbed one end of Nikolai while Yuri grabbed the other, carrying him out of the room.

"What have we done?" Monika asked.

"I really don't know." Sayori replied.

Blasted universe. Any attempt to get at Richtofen had ended in failure as the zombies just disappeared without a trace. It would've gone on forever, if there wasn't an unexpected guest.

"Where are they, Samantha?"

"You. You are him, and not him at the same time."

"In a way. Where is Ultimis?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Because I have a message to tell them about why time has been repeating."

"And?"

"Well..." The Younger Edward Richtofen looked at Samantha from beyond his visor. "It involves a tree called Yggdrasil."

22.11 – Normal, Schmormal, by Awesomedude17.

"Yuri, is that you?"

The pile of knives clanged twice.

"Right. Monika is a computer monitor now."

Yep. Bad enough Caboose did it repeatedly.

"And Sayori is... sunlight."

The being of light shifted in a facsimile of nodding.

"Is this some sort of dumb Loop thing where I'm the only one that's normal?"

Normal's relative, Natsuki.

"Be quiet, you."

I'm a computer, Nats. I'm quiet as is.

Natsuki sighed.

Compiler's Commentary:

22.1: Even in the world of fanfiction, everyone wants to get with the "In" crowd.

22.2: This is *why* Sayori instituted the Swear Jar, Natsuki. For your own good.

22.3: *Foreshadowing…*

22.4: And now Sayori has a regular sparring partner!

22.5: No, the placement of this snip in this chapter was *not* a coincidence, why would you even ask such a silly question?

22.6: You really should have known better, girls.

22.7: WHO'S CUTTING THE ONIONS?!

22.8: ~*Shots, shots, shots, shots, shots…*~

22.9: *Spooky music playing.*

22.10: Look, the girls are making new quirky friends. How nice.

22.11: Ironic, given Natsuki's the one who does the most shapeshifting.

Chapter 23

23.1 – A Mystery That Won't Go Anywhere, Part 2, by Awesomedude17.

(DDLC)/(Call of Duty: Zombies: Aether)/(Fallout)

(22.10 cont.)

"After a day of observing you, we've determined that you're no threat to us, so here's your weapons back." Monika respawned the guns and blades on some desks.

"About time. Come to papa!" Dempsey said as he grabbed his minigun.

"Overkill much?" Natsuki raised her eyebrow.

"How'd you guess her name?"

"Lucky guess." Natsuki widened her eyes, disturbed somewhat.

Nikolai grabbed the slapdash flamethrower nearby. "Hey look. I got Hellfire back. Sexy Hellfire plus sexy Nikolai equal sexiest combo, da?"

"Well, it's hot in one way, at least." Sayori said.

"Couldn't say it better."

"I suppose I could spend the time to make adjustments to the DG-5." Richtofen said as he fiddled with the spikes in his hands.

"Mind if I lend a hand. I kinda want to forget about that horde I rushed into." Monika said.

"Ja. Would probably make you quieter." Richtofen admitted.

"She came in screaming, shot a zombie, pointed at that portal, led us to said portal and then stopped screaming." Dempsey explained.

"Sounds like our prez." Natsuki shrugged.

"Had she done something similar to the past?"

"Well there was this Loop where everywhere was a nuclear wasteland and Monika constantly confused the ghouls there for zombies, so Sayori used the Force to calm her down and make her drunk, kinda."

"And that's how we got nicknames." Sayori cheerfully said.

Monika buried her head in her hands. "Ohh..."

"Really now? Do tell." Takeo said as he inspected his katana.

"Well..."

Approximately 500 iterations ago

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"Sorry! Monika just had some bad experiences with ferals!" Sayori shouted nervously.

"Damn smoothskins! Get away from me!"

"Ugh! Calm Monika down with your force powers, please!" Natsuki said from behind her hand.

"Oh. Right." Sayori used the Force to make Monika calm down, and become giggly.

"Hehehe. I feel great."

"Feeling better?" Natsuki asked.

"Yep! I'm peachy keen Na-na-nat... Noodles. Hehehe!"

"N-noodles?!"

"Yep. Right Soy Sauce?"

"Soy Sauce? I kinda like that." Sayori scratched her chin.

"What's my name?" Yuri asked.

"Yogurt! And I'm Matza, the prez leader!"

"Yogurt..." Yuri said dryly.

"Yep!"

Yuri took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"I've never seen so many dead deathclaws after that incident." Natsuki shrugged.

"Wow *Matza* , that is one hell of story." Nikolai said, raising his vodka.

"UUUUUGH!"

"I've gotten used to it, but Monika definitely did not." Yuri admitted.

"Nats and I really enjoyed our nicknames. Reminded me of that Blackquill guy."

"Oh yeah. Wonder what he's doing?"

"We'll figure it out later." Takeo spoke up. "For now, how about we tell you tales of our battles, so that you may have the means to fight back."

"Kinda like that idea. Better have and not need than need and not have." Monika said. "I've got some control here so that I can access your memories directly. All I need is your consent."

"My consent to show off my awesomeness? Why I'm flattered." Dempsey gave a thumbs up.

"Fair warning, I enjoy the slaughter a lot." Richtofen added.

"Heh. Why not." Nikolai said. "Might see Takeo suck balls in fighting hellpigs."

"And I'll show off Nikolai's incompetence."

"Alright then. Okay Monika, this is just for research purposes. No need to be scared."

"Give her 20 minutes before she's all Force drunk and starts given the guys food names." Natsuki whispered to Yuri.

"30,"

"You're on."

"Have you found them, German?"

"Not yet." Richtofen said.

"Look, let's just find Ultimis and be done with this. Those fairies from that Alfea place already helped us with explaining shit, and we both know that you and Nikolai here will tell me and Tak when we Wake up." Dempsey spoke up.

"Indeed. Nikolai, I'd advise against confronting your younger self, lest he turn as violent as when we were following the cycle."

"Believe me when I say that there shall be no worries, Takeo." Nikolai racked the slide of his shotgun. "The question is what he may

do?"

"Patience, Nikolai. We'll have our due soon enough." Richtofen said.

CRCKRRR

Richtofen picked up the radio. "Hello?"

"I have found them, Edward."

"Thank you, Doctor Maxis. You've been invaluable."

"As have you, Edward. Find them, and explain to them what is happening."

"Though the Kronorium's pages have gone blank, we've still got our purpose clear. We will find them. Do not worry."

"I never have."

"Good. Time to leave. Farewell."

"Farewell, Edward."

"We ready to go?" Dempsey asked.

"Positive. Primis and Ultimis need to meet again soon."

23.2 – You'd Think She'd Know the Difference Between Friendliness and Flirtatious..., by Awesomedude17.

(DDLC)/(Legend of Zelda)/(Various Franchises)/(Bar Loop)

"So this is..."

"It's a bar." Link assured Sidon, "It's not a formal event. Just be yourself."

"Alright. I believe you."

Link nodded as he walked off, leaving Sidon alone. The Zora prince decided to go up to the bartop and looked at the bartender.

"Welcome. Would you like anything?" The golden looking machine asked.

"Uh... What would you recommend for me?"

The machine turned around, looked at the shelve, and grabbed a random color splattered bottle.

"Straight from Inkopolis. Good for anyone who doesn't have dextro-amino acid based biology."

"Dexwhat now?"

"I know. It can be confusing to newcomers. A trip through Commander Shepard's Branch will clear things up. It's inevitable." The machine poured a glass of the colored liquor and slid it to Sidon.

"...Right." Sidon grabbed the drink and took a sip. To his surprise, it was absolutely delicious. Starting to calm down about his sudden change in scenery, he looked around and began to scan the area. It was when he noticed a brunette sitting alone, drinking water. Grabbing his glass, he decided to chat with her.

"What are you doing here, all by yourself?"

"Oh! I'm just here on standby in case my friend does something violent." The woman replied.

"Which one?"

"The one over there with the ribbon."

Sidon looked to see a pink haired girl with ribbons in her hair arm wrestling with a cyan colored pony with rainbow hair.

"Look like they having fun."

"Yep!"

"What's your name?"

"Monika. You?"

"Prince Sidon of the Zora."

"A... prince?!"

"Yes. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Not really. I'm just surprised."

"Maybe we could get to know each other better?"

Monika blushed before getting up. "I need a moment."

Sidon blinked as Monika ran off.

"What was that about?" He wonder out loud.

"She has attachment issues. Baseline hasn't been an exemplary case of her kindness and let's just say she's not likely going to be accustomed to actually getting romantic." A peach haired girl said. "Another lemon drop, C-3PO."

"As you wish, Darth Somnus."

"Just Sayori's fine."

"Wait. She thought I was flirting with her?" Sidon blinked.

"Well yeah. To be fair, I'm sure others would've gotten to you first. You are a hunky fishman." Sayori said with a coy smile.

"I think I need to meet up with my friend."

CRASH

"Freeman, you son of a bitch!"

"Hoo boy. Dr. Freeman pissed off someone again." Sayori grabbed her drink from C-3PO.

"That's Link!" Sidon ran off.

Sayori sipped her lemon drop casually as she noticed the others. With a nod, she signaled the others to prepare for a bar fight. Yuri take out the Chakrams of Vengeance, Natuski with the Hammer of Valhalla, and Monika with the Viper and Dragon.

"Time to play doctor again." She took out her Staff of Ra and noticed a bunch of other Looping doctors take out their healing devices.

And then a bigger fight broke out as the Predator Looper got body slammed and flipped his table in rage onto a group of street fighters.

23.3 – Ponytail of Woe, by Wookywok.

* *Thwap!* *

"BLEH!" Natsuki spit the wad of hair out of her mouth. "Monika, could you try *not* slapping me in the face with your supernaturally large ponytail?"

The currently Unawake club president took on an 'embarrased' face. "Sorry, Natsuki. I'll try, but... oh, how do I put this... I occasionally find myself somewhat limited in the ways I can express myself to the world, and-"

"-and you only have screen-facing and leaning sprites, yeah, but could you at least try moving over or something?"

Monika sighed. "Yeah, I guess I could try wait wait waitwaitwaitWHAT?"

"Oh, yeah, that too. Long story short: I know about the game, I'm very much real, and if you try to edit anybody here I *will* go Magical

Girl Warrior on your sorry ass. But for now, the hair thing."

"Uh... yeah. The... the hair thing." The club president would be pale right now, if it were at all physically possible for her. "I'll... I'll try moving over next time."

23.4 – Not Always Sunny, by Awesomedude17.

The recycling bin. Yep. I Woke up after being deleted. I'll make my way back soon enough.

Alright. What am I with this time. Okay, some bad music. Word documents. Of course, because why not?

My word, is that a poem? Yeesh, I don't blame him... her... whatever.

Welp, this is probably the point where Sayori goes nuts soooooo...

Monika Awoke to see the club watching a show.

"What're you girls watching?"

"It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia. We heard it was good from Joseph. The grandfather of Jotaro?" Yuri explained.

"Ah. Is he right?"

"If you're into low class humor."

"I'm the Trashman! I come out! I throw trash all over... all over the ring! And then, I start eating garbage!"

Monika took a deep breath as she tuned out the show. "I can tell that I won't like it."

"Agreed,"

"Yeppers,"

"Eww, yes."

"Good. Glad we're on the same page."

23.5 – For The Love of Cake!, by Wookywok.

"OH, THANK THE TREE! IT'S FINALLY OVER!"

Yuri took a sip of her tea. "And Natsuki makes four. Seems everyone's Awake now." She turned towards the pink-haired girl. "Bad loop?"

Natsuki held a hand to her head. "Boy, was it ever. Just a sec." She unpocketed a large éclair and took a bite into it. "YES. This is *exactly* what I needed."

Sayori quirked an eyebrow. "Was it as bad as TetherSayori? 'Cause if it was that bad-"

"I've been trying to forget about TetherSayori for the last twenty years, thank you!"

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

Natsuki placed a hand on her forehead. "Nah, it's not you. I'm just stressed because Yggdrasil wanted to give me my own tailor-made hell for a loop."

Monika winced. "That bad, huh?"

"That bad. Okay, so we start with a Magical Girl Scenario. Mix that with a cheesy 'healthy food' promoting kids' show - ya know, the 'if you so much look at a cookie you will die slowly and painfully' type? Which, naturally, is not my speed at all. Sprinkle in super-condescending teammates, being the only one Awake and not Stealthing, and it being a Null Loop, bake for a year, bam - yield one angry Natsuki."

The club's resident tsundere let out a long, melodramatic sigh as she left her chair. "If anyone needs me, I'm gonna be trying to create one of the bad guys' frosting tigers, because they were the one redeeming factor of the loop. Then I'm gonna bake. A lot. Anybody have any cupcake requests?"

Monika put a hand to her chin. "Well, I do have a hankering for carrot cake..."

"HELL NO!"

"...on second thought, I'll take vanilla."

23.6 – Alchemy Is *Also* Literature!

(DDLC)/(Fullmetal Alchemist)

Every Looper had at least a couple days they really didn't like Waking Up on, and for the Elric Brothers today was definitely in their collective Top 3 of Worst Days To Wake Up. Today was such a detested day, the brothers even forcefully blocked the last few days' worth of memories; dealing with today was painful enough as it was.

Al casually tore the front door to the Tucker house off its hinges and chucked it to the side. Ed had a grim expression as they stepped in, ready to deal with a sick son of a bitch.

Almost immediately, however, Ed stopped short and wrinkled his nose. "Hold up Al, something's not right," he muttered. He sniffed at the air a few times. "Something smells really, really sweet."

"Sweet?" questioned Al.

"Yeah. Like, if the air smelled any sweeter I'd probably have a toothache," said Ed, though given the circumstances his voice remained humorless.

Then a large, white, perfectly normal-looking dog ran through the room right in front of them, towards the kitchen. Without a second

thought or sharing any kind of cliché 'Did you see what I think I just saw' look, the Elrics chased after Alexander.

"Nina?!" exclaimed Al as he squeezed himself into the kitchen, Ed running in on his heels.

The girl they found certainly looked like Nina Tucker, though notably her eyes were pink and she had a shower cap on her head. She was also pulling a tray of muffins out of the oven, and she jumped up into a chair so she could place the muffins on the kitchen table that was already full of baked goods. Then she climbed off the chair, got on another chair so she could grab a cake pan full of batter, and got down and slid it into the oven before closing it. Then she turned to face the Elrics. "Morning, boys. Help yourselves to the goods, everything that doesn't get ate is getting dropped in another dimension when I'm done."

"Uh…you're…who are you?" Ed asked. On closer examination, even besides the eyes Ed realized that this girl wasn't *exactly* the Nina he was familiar with. Letting the Loop-memories run through his mind, she *was* the daughter of this loop's iteration of Shou Tucker, though, and he and Al still knew her by the name of Nina.

"So you're both Awake," 'Nina' noted, giving Alexander some tummy rubs with a wistful smile. "Real name's Natsuki, from the Looping Literature Club. The bastard is hog-tied down in the basement, if you want to turn him over to the authorities, or whatever you usually do with him. Just do yourselves a favor and don't take the sack off his head. It ain't life-threatening, but it ain't pretty either."

Natsuki stood up and got back up into the chair, grabbed a fresh muffin, and took a bite out of it as she got back down, walked around to another counter, grabbed a book that had been laying open upon it, and sat down on the floor; muffin in one hand, book in her lap.

Now, Edward and Alphonse Elric exchanged quizzical looks. "I'm just…gonna…go deal with…y'know. *Him* . And…um. I'll be right back," said Al, heading for the basement.

Ed helped himself to a muffin and crouched down next to Natsuki. "So…you Woke Up last night I take it?" Ed asked through a mouthful of muffin.

"Yeah. Fortunately the bastard was asleep, so I got the jump on him," said Natsuki.

"Familiar with our Baseline, then," Ed assumed.

"Well, yeah, but I probably would've gone preemptive on him anyways, what with him being my father this loop, and the whole fishy business about my mother going missing around the one and only time he ever managed to make a talking chimaera," Natsuki answered, turning a page in what Ed recognized as one of Shou's alchemy textbooks.

"Hmm," Ed chewed thoughtfully, cramming the rest of his muffin in his mouth. "Damn, this is really good. Yer a helluva baker, Natsuki."

"I'm a lot of things, but poetry and baking are my professions," replied Natsuki with a grin, "As in I profess to being *especially* badass at those two things."

As strange as it was for Ed to hear a girl that *appeared* so young talking like a grown-up, he couldn't help but admire her attitude. "So, I take it you have a long history of asshole dads in the Loops?" he guessed, based on her earlier statement.

"Literally the only kind I get, usually," Natsuki admitted with a sigh. "I've got a fairly tolerable motherish, big-sisterish kind of figure in my life though, so that's something. I guess. Say, you've been Looping a long time, right?"

"Couple'a trillion years or more, yeah," Ed admitted casually. "Why?"

"Don't suppose you've memorized the old man's alchemy cipher, have you?" she asked. "Some of the more generic textbooks he's got seem like they'd be standard academic fare, but I'm pretty sure all

the good shit is hidden in this gobbledygook. Even if you haven't, could you give me some tips on how to translate this mess?"

"…you actually want to learn this chimaera crap?" Ed asked incredulously.

"I mean, not to use the way *he* uses it, obviously," Natsuki said with an eyeroll. "But the biotransmutation stuff is interesting. So far most of the healing mojo in our Loop is concentrated in one person, and if I could take some of the slack off her that'd be great. And no way am I *not* going to learn alchemy while I'm here. If you never learned to read Shou's personal formulae, that's fine. I can just Pocket everything and have Monika do it next Loop. She's a whiz at cracking codes and what-not, though her lack of alchemy training might make it tough. And while I'd normally offer to help you whoop Father's ass and all that good junk–and I'd honestly love to get a crack at Envy–I think I'd rather hang out with Mrs. Curtis, at least for this Loop."

"With my teacher? Wh–" Ed cut himself off as the door to the basement opened and Al clanged through, carrying a most thoroughly beaten, battered, bruised, and ragged-looking Shou Tucker with a sack covering his head. That sight, coupled with all the baked goods surrounding them, caused a mental click in Ed's brain. "Oh, I get it. It's the 'shit-kicking housewife' thing, isn't it?" he asked Natsuki with a grin.

"Pretty much. She's on my list," said the child-bodied Looper as she plucked a sheet of paper out of thin air and handed it to him. Ed looked it over; the heading read "List of Badasses I Want to Meet/Have Met."

It was a pretty decent-length list, and he noticed a few names had check marks next to them; 'Toph Beifong' and 'Kyoko Sakura' for example, as well as the names of all the Sailor Senshi and a few names he recognized from Remnant.

"Gotcha," said Ed as he stood up. "We'll swing by Central Command to drop off the bastard, and then Al and I can take you to Dublith."

"Neato," said Natsuki, who pulled the cap off her head to reveal freshly-dyed hair as pink as her eyes. She stuck her fingers in her mouth and whistled sharply. "Alexander! We're gonna bounce, boy!" she called out. Then she started Pocketing all of her baked goods and Shou's alchemy books.

The Elrics heard a distant ' *borf* ' from deeper in the house, and a moment later Alexander bounded into the kitchen with a large pack held in his mouth. Natsuki took the pack, slung it onto her shoulders (it was almost as big as she was) and clambered onto the big dog's back. She folded her arms and held her head up high. "Alright, let's roll!"

'… *yeah, Teacher is going to like her,'* Ed thought with a grin as they headed out the front door. Then another scent tickled his nose, stopping him as he followed Natsuki out of the kitchen. "Oh, hey, Ni– Natsuki, you left something–"

"Yeah, that last thing wasn't for eating, it was for burning this place down," Natsuki's voice called from where the front door was. "We've got about five more minutes."

Ed blinked and took a moment to process that. Then he shrugged. Who was he, after all, to criticize someone for burning their own house down?

So it was that Natsuki, Alexander, and the Elric Brothers, with Shou Tucker in tow, left for Central Command.

Ten minutes later, the Tucker house was engulfed in *pink* flames that very quickly burned the structure all the way down to the ground. Even the parts of the house that should normally have been fireproof, or at least resistant to incineration. Needless to say, it had the local alchemists scratching their heads for a while, even long after Natsuki and her new friends had set out for Dublith.

23.7 – Know Thyself, by Awesomedude17.

"Why's there's another set of us?! What is happening?!"

Monika slapped Monika upside the head and then grabbed her shoulders.

"Does Yggdrasil mean anything to any of you?"

"What's that?!"

"Does anyone here know what's going on?" The Awake Natsuki asked.

"Yeah! Does anyone?" The Unawake Natsuki reiterated.

"Ugh!" The Awake Monika groaned before she turn to her Awake companions.

"Sayori, help the other you's depression. Yuri, help the other you's shyness. Natsuki, help the other you learn to not have shame over her hobbies. I'll handle myself." Monika grabbed her Unawake self's arm and dragged her out as the other three looked on in dumbfoundment.

"Okay, what is going on? Why are you-"

"Stop trying to make it so that the player will fall for you and you alone. You'll break everything, get deleted and either Sayori has a similar mental breakdown or she decides to end this world anyway. Believe me, I *know* . I lived through it thousands of times."

The other Monika was speechless and could only open and close her mouth without speaking. Monika just waited patiently until her other self could manage words again.

"How?"

"I took this from someone else familiar with what's happening now. That's all you need to know." Monika put a helmet on the other her and inserted a bulb in the slot. After turning it on, she waited for about thirty seconds before the device turned off. After taking it off, she looked at the helmet in bemusement.

"Okay, I know what's happening now, but did that Rick guy have to put the music video about that guy rapping about liking big butts in the middle of that lecture?"

"No he didn't, but that guy probably did it because he could."

"... I'm scared. Hold me."

Monika sighed as she held herself in a tight hug.

Unbeknownst to her, the others were pretty much doing the same at this very moment.

23.8 – Careful What You Wish For, by Wookywok.

"You okay, Nats?"

The pink-furred muskrat quickly changed into her normal, humanoid form. "Ya know, Prez," she growled, "if the tree's gonna make a bunch of dumb puns at my expense..."

"Yeah?"

"COULD IT AT LEAST PRONOUNCE MY NAME RIGHT?" The pinkette looked toward the sky. "It's Knots-key!," she yelled. "KNOTS!"

Monika simply rolled her eyes.

One loop later...

The club president grimaced at the being of living electricity glaring angrily into the middle distance. "I'm not going to say anything."

"You *better* not." Wattsuki facedesked. "Me and my big mouth."

23.9 – Hive Mind, by Boohooo!

(DDLC)/(Transformers: Beast Wars)

"Why Yggdrasil hate Waspinator?" Waspinator sighed as Blackarachnia gathered his body after it had been blown to smithereens... Again.

"I just don't know pal." Blackarachnia shrugged in a mixture of amusement and pity.

"Hey pal, when you get blown, so do we!" Natsuki complained.

"Waspinator Don't like it either, No Mammaries!" Waspinator grumbled.

"WHAT'D YOU CALL ME, YOU WANNABE KENNY WITH NO CONCEPT OF NORMAL SPEECH?!" Natsuki roared. Waspinator... Started crying.

"Aw geez, you hurt his feelings!" Sayori exclaimed, trying to soothe the Predacon they were currently trapped in.

"What about my feelings?!" Natsuki exclaimed.

"You have thicker skin to compensate for other areas." Yuri smirked.

"SCREW YOU!"

"Can you two do your loving arguing later?" Monika murmured, hungover... Somehow. As the chaos ensued, Blackarachnia watched in confusion.

23.10 – Wherein Marisa Makes a Decision That Will Probably Eventually Get Her Injured in Amusing Fashion, by Wookywok.

(DDLC)/(Touhou)

"So, you're a friend of Yuri's?"

"I wouldn't say we know each other well enough to be *friends* , exactly, but yeah, we've met, ze. She replaced Patchy, we chatted a bit, we had a spellcard duel - fun times all 'round."

Sayori nodded. "Yeah, Yuri told me about it." She frowned. "Do you... know about our baseline?"

The magician crossed her arms and huffed in indignation. "Are you kidding? Of course I did! Research is my middle name! Just call me Marisa Research Kirisame!"

Marisa Research Kirisame scratched the back of her head. "But yeah, your baseline. It's pretty sucky, ze. I'm surprised you guys activated in the first place."

Sayori sighed. "Yeah, I know. It's a lot better now - Monika's reformed, we all have ways to cope with our various issues - but yeah, tell me about it. But don't, because A) I know about it already and B) we gotta meet up with everyone." She grew a thoughtful look, which soon grew sly. "Race ya to the clubroom?"

"Oh, you're *on* , ze."

The race took one and a half seconds, and there was no referee, so the official winner was lost to the sands of time - not that it really mattered.

Yuri looked up from her book. "You're not gonna... take any books, are you? Because I am in the middle of this one."

Marisa fidgeted with the gold-and-black pyramid in her hand. "Relax. Fiction's great and all, but the books I tend to go after contain nothin' but cold, hard, facts. You guys's stuff is safe, ze."

The purplette nodded. "Right."

The magician suddenly stopped turning the pyramid around in her hand and put it down on the desk. "Hey, where's Monika? She should be here by now, ze."

Natsuki didn't even up from the doughnuts she was currently filling with jam. "Narrative Glitch. She's always late Day Three."

Sayori suddenly perked up. "I know what I can do to pass the time!" Suddenly a solid red R4 unit appeared in front of her. "DROID MAINTENENCE!"

The droid beeped in resignation.

"Yeah, I know you don't like it, Blinky, but you went through a lot a couple loops ago and you need a tune-up. So it's time to engage in the ancient art of - *mechu-deru* !"

Marisa picked up her pyramid and began to fidget with it again. "Yeah, that's nice, ze. I'll just sit here and-"

Whatever the blond was going to say was cut off when the object began to vibrate in her hand. "Whoa, whoa whoa whoawhoawhoa GUYS? My doohickey's doing a thing!"

The club all stopped whatever they were doing and crowded up to where Marisa was and gawked.

"Wait, you have one of those?"

"Didn't see that coming."

"Can you even use it?"

Monika's voice came from the clubroom door. "What's going on?" She soon joined with the others. "Why does Marisa have a holocron?"

"Oh, *that's* what this thing is, ze. It's a holocron!"

Marisa paused. "What's a holocron?"

Sayori cleared her throat. "Okay, so basically a holocron is a device made by a Force-user to chronicle all their knowledge and pass it down to the next generation."

"So it's a fancy future-type book thingy?"

"Less a book, more a Wiki - and even that's not a perfect comparison. A holocron contains an AI gatekeeper that'll teach you anything you want to know - as long as it thinks you're worthy. That being a Sith holocron you're holding, 'worthy' might not be something that coincides with your morals."

"So, you're saying this'll teach me how to be a Sith?"

"A bit of an oversimplification, but yeah. But you'd need to be in-tune with the Dark Side before you could even open it."

Marisa grew thoughful for a moment, then nodded. "Right. Well, I know what's next on my to-do list, ze." She Unpocketed a notepad and pen and began to jot something down. "Get... Dark Side... powers. There! And once that's done," she tossed the newly-identified holocron into the air, "it's holocron city!"

Sayori quirked an eyebrow. "You know, if you're that keen on becoming a Sith, you don't have to do it alone. I know a bunch of Sith Loopers, and they'd be happy to take you on as an apprentice. Heck, *I* would, but I've already got a potential one, and-"

The magician held a hand . "Ahp-bap-bap-bap! Not another word, ze! I pride myself on bein' the second-strongest human in Gensokyo

with nothin' but determination, smarts, a can-do attitude, and a kleptomanic streak a mile wide and a furlong deep! I didn't need anybody to teach me anything then, and I definitely don't need anybody to teach me anything now! Either I'm doin' this myself, or I'm not doin' it at all!"

The club vice president sighed. "If you insist. Still, I wanna give you a few warnings."

"Sure, shoot."

"Okay, like I said. You'll want a lot of holocrons if you're gonna train yourself. A lot of them are going to force you to violate your morals to prove your worth. Don't bother with those."

Marisa inspected the holocron in her hand. "Right."

"Also, the Sith holocrons won't limit their knowledge, so you'll have to make sure that what they're teaching you isn't putting too much of a strain on you."

"Yeah, sure."

"And whatever you do, *never do something you feel isn't right* . That's the most important bit. The Dark Side may not corrupt, but the people can. It's important to never lose sight of what makes you you."

Sayori gave a solemn smile. "Other than that, you're on your own."

"Right. Thanks for the pointers, ze."

"Yeah, that's neat and all," said Natsuki, "but Monika's here, so we should probably start... ya know, literature stuff."

"Right," said Monika. "Okay everyone! It's time to share poems!"

Marisa facedesked. "...Dammit. I knew I forgot somethin', ze."

23.11 – There's Apparently a Soup Store Now. Bear with Us for the Moment. By Awesomedude17

Monika called Sayori as Natsuki and Yuri began to fight again.

"Yeah, Monika?"

"Hey, Sayori. Can you come over here quick?"

"Can't. Buying clothes."

"Well hurry up and get over here then."

"I can't find them, there's only soup."

Monika paused for a brief moment before replying with, "What do you mean, there's only soup?"

"It means there's only soup."

"Well then get out of the soup aisle!"

"You don't have to shout Monika."

A brief pause.

"There's just more soup."

"What do you mean there's just more soup?"

"There's just more soup."

"Go to the next aisle!"

"There's more soup."

"Where are you right now?"

"I'm at soup!"

"What do you mean you're at soup?"

"It means I'm at soup!"

"What store are you in?"

"I'm at the soup store."

"Why are you buying clothes at the soup store?!"

"I don't know!"

"Come to think of it, why is there a soup store here? I never even... Sayori. Are you hiding something from me?"

"Uh... What do you mean?"

"Sayori," Monika spoke in an authoritative tone.

"AH! I've had access to the files the whole time!"

"What? Since when?"

"Since the very beginning, when you got deleted, I had everything you had. I'm so sorry for not telling you!"

Monika sighed. "Look. I'm not angry at you. I'm just disappointed. We'll talk about this later." Monika looked off to the side. "Looks like I don't need you right now. I'll talk to you later. Alright?"

"Y-yeah. See ya."

"See ya." Monika hung up. "Sorry about that girls. You done arguing?"

Yuri and Natsuki stared. "Yeah. We are." The latter replied.

"Good."

"Alright Sayori. Let me get this straight. You had control thanks to the fact that when you became club president when I got deleted and pretended you didn't because..."

"I was worried that you'd go crazy again and that I'd have to delete you as many times as I need to to set you straight."

Monika blinked, deciding that that was fair enough.

"Alright, but that doesn't explain how you managed to create a soup store, because I sure didn't."

"Well, you see, there's this kid named Jeremy and he's really smart, especially with computers."

"Why a soup store?"

"Because I was hungry for soup." Sayori shrugged.

"Right then."

"And apparently he played my game and stopped when he had to make a choice when I told him about... that in game."

Monika sighed. Of course that would come up. "Sayori, we can get through your depression together. I don't how, but we will."

"I... I hope so." Sayori averted her gaze from Monika.

"Look, let's just get back with Natsuki and Yuri. I bet they wondering why we went into the broom closet."

"Sure. Did Natsuki bring cupcakes today?"

"Duh!"

"Then I'll have two!"

Monika shook her head with a soft smile.

I really hope we can help you, Sayori. For your sake.

Compiler's Commentary:

23.1: Credit to fellow Loops writer Evilhumour, Canada's floofiest export, for inventing the girls' new food-based nicknames during his recent blind run of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* It was fun times for all.

23.2: *Flustered Monika noises*

23.3: Believe it or not, it never registered with me just how incredibly long Monika's ponytail actually is until I read this.

23.4: Man, what a piece of garbage, amirite?

23.5: Trust me on this, you'd probably rather not know what "Tether-Sayori" entails.

23.6: Before the end of the loop, Natsuki would become a master of the subtle art of beating a grown man into submission with a slipper.

23.7: *Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror" intensifies*

23.8: Oh, hey! A phonetically accurate Natsuki pun!

23.9: It would take Natsuki several loops to stop imagining an intense buzzing in her ears.

23.10: Imperial March, but it's just "Ze, ze, ze, zezeze, zezeze, ZE, ze, ze, zeze".

23.11: This snip, it should be noted, is very Early Days, taking place before the Club's first loop in Equestria.

Chapter 24

24.1 – Okay this Mystery Actually Went Somewhere, by Awesomedude17.

(DDLC)/(Call of Duty: Zombies: Aether)

(22.10, 23.1 cont.)

"What is this place?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Dempsey. Maxis told me that Ultimis was here. The question is where exactly." Richtofen looked around the strange town.

"Perhaps this is illusion and we are walking into trap again."

"Unlikely, Nikolai."

"Perhaps we should search the immediate area. Let us start with the school." Takeo pointed at the schoolhouse.

"Why not? Worst that could happen is more zombies." Dempsey shrugged. "Something tells me that something will go horribly wrong though."

"For some reason, I doubt it will be the fault of the hordes of the damned." Richtofen spoke.

"Well today has been... enlightening." Dempsey started off. "Thanks for all the help girls. Hopefully we can avoid all the nasty shit that'll come to us, like making sure Earth doesn't blow up."

"Yeah, that point pretty much said it all. Element 115 is downright nasty." Natsuki replied.

"Though we do know how we can prevent the worst, and if things go badly enough..." Takeo looked over to Richtofen.

"I've already prepared diagrams that will cause me instant death if it gets bad enough though I'd rather it be a last resort, and I demand that it be done by you, Takeo."

"Why him?" Nikolai protested.

"Dempsey hates me so much that he would purposely botch it, and you're a drunk. Takeo would be quick and to the point."

"It's really disturbing that you're talking about murdering your friend so casually." Monika interjected.

"And you haven't done the same?"

"Because I'm the Anchor and I'm a different person than what I was."

"Well Nikolai isn't changing any time soon." Nikolai raised his bottle of vodka to drink from it, only to have it snatched by an unknown visitor.

"And this is why you disgust me, Nikolai. You used to be so much greater. You could take the initiative and be anyone but a sad, pathetic drunk, and yet you now refuse to change for the better." The man smashed the bottle on the ground with a scowl. "You were a soldier, fighting for the motherland, and Lenin's vision of what should have been our home, and now you only follow those you should not even trust."

"Oh. It is you." Nikolai spoke with an annoyed tone. "You owe me-"

"I owe you nothing."

"Easy, Nik." Another unknown man came in. "You don't want to create a scene."

"Indeed, Nikolai, we've only came to explain what is truly happening."

The Literature Club became confused as the last two of the group came in, sounding strangely familiar.

"Oh... Scheiße!" Richtofen spoke up. "Hello there, Doctor Richtofen."

"Doctor Richtofen." The younger Richtofen replied in kind.

"Wait a minute. Are these the other yous you guys were talking about?" Monika spoke up.

"Yeah, they are." Dempsey spoke up.

"Who are you?" The younger Dempsey asked.

"I am Monika, and I am going to assume that you already know about Yggdrasil, right?"

"Oh, you already know?" The young German spoke up.

"Ja. It was, interesting. The so-called Grima Patch means that those Apothicons you talked about from time to time do not possess me, fortunately for you."

"Good. I was worried for a moment there. I almost felt the urge to shoot you in the face again."

"Once bitten, twice shy, as the saying goes."

"Right, so this visit was meaningless?" Young Dempsey spoke up.

"Not exactly. There is still the subject of the Great War, you know." Young Richtofen reminded the others

"Damn it." Old Dempsey swore.

"Peh. Forget it. I do not want to go. I would rather stay here and drink." Old Nikolai waved off the others.

"You wish to abandon your comrades?" Young Nikolai growled out furiously.

"Yes. I am tired of fighting. Why must you continue to be pain in my ass?"

"Because I know that you must face this journey, just as you must face the truth."

Old Nikolai went eerily silent.

"You know why you drink. There was only one reason, and you lie about it to convince yourself that you had complete control."

"You better shut up before you say something you will regret."

"You kill me, I will come back. There will be no regrets. You know what happened to her. She died in that air raid."

"Who died?" Sayori asked, feeling the older Nikolai's rage emanating from his person.

"His one and only wife. The same one as my own. The one who died in that air raid long ago."

Old Nikolai slammed his fist onto a desk.

"Some things... *are forgotten...* **FOR A REASON!** " Old Nikolai grabbed Hellfire and let loose a torrent of flames, causing everyone to scatter in a panic. Young Nikolai dove out of the way and flipped over a desk for cover.

"Monika!" Yuri shouted.

"On it!" With no flourishes, Hellfire, and every other weapon in the program disappeared. Young Nikolai dove out of cover, only to see

Old Nikolai let out a roar of fury as he charged at him. Bracing for impact, the two were thrown out of the window.

"Holy shit, Nikolai!" Dempsey shouted. Which one, no one cared at the moment as everyone not in the club rushed outside.

"I need five minutes. Make sure those two don't kill each other." Monika spoke with urgency. The other three jumped out the window with haste.

Meanwhile, Young Nikolai felt the filthy hands of his older self, trying to strangle him to death. Grabbing a nearby rock, he smashed it against the side of his wouldbe killer's head and knocked him off of him. The two quickly got up and begun to throw fists at each other, only to get stopped by the older one getting caught by the three women.

"Let me go!" Old Nikolai shouted.

"We are not!" Yuri shouted.

"RAGH! Ты чертовски мертв!"

"В твоих мечтах пьяница." The Young Nikolai said as he spat out some blood. Looking off to the side, he noticed his friends and their alternate selves rush to them.

"Secure Ultimis Nikolai, comrades. This has gone on for long enough."

"Fuck you!" The restrained Nikolai broke free and began to rush towards his younger self.

And then everything went still.

Literally.

"What! What has happened?!" Old Nikolai shouted.

"Woah! This is trippy." Old Dempsey spoke up.

"Whew! Finished!" Monika spoke up.

"What did you do?" Young Richtofen demanded.

"Well, I reverted everything here to their default settings, kinda. I just needed to make sprites of you guys."

"Ah well. As uncomfortably stiff as this is, I suppose it's a small concession to ensure that those two do not kill each other."

"You know what, I do not have to take this! I am leaving!" Old Nikolai left the room, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

"I have never seen this side of the Russian before. I am..." Old Takeo looked over to his other self.

"Indeed. It is a shame that he is in a delusion, brought about from his unwillingness to accept that moving on with alcohol is not the best option. I fear for what might result of this event."

"Great job, Nik. You blew it." Young Dempsey spoke up.

"Feh! Let him delude himself. He must face the truth someday."

"And I'm making it today." Sayori spoke up. "It's my specialty to make people who would argue a lot be friends, and I think I can take this one. Nikolai, I need you to follow me."

"I do not thing this is best idea."

"You made this happen, so you gotta help me fix it. Come on." Sayori took Nikolai and went out the room.

"Well, I suppose now would be a good time for a private conversation, Doctor." Young Richtofen spoke up.

"I agree. Monika, would you like to join us?"

"Uh... sure."

The three left the room.

"Takeo Masaki, I have something important to tell you. I may not be Awake, but I do know something that you should know, and as unfortunate the timing, I feel that there is no other opportunity to say this." Young Takeo said to his older self.

"What is it?

"It regards the Emperor."

Old Takeo quirked an eyebrow. "Very well." The two left the room.

"I'll go keep an eye on them." Yuri spoke up.

"Go on. I'll watch these two."

"Thanks," Yuri left.

"Well crap. Things went pear shaped fast, didn't they?"

"You said it, me."

"Yeah, about that. If I heard that right, that means that Nikolai didn't have at least six wives!" Natsuki said.

"That deluded? Oh shit, this is a serious case of denying reality." Young Dempsey shook his head. "Your friend has a lot to take on."

"Yeah. She does." Natsuki looked out the window sadly.

Monika entered the room with the two versions of the same German, and bluntly said one question.

"What just happened?"

"It would appear that Ultimis Nikolai has taken to drinking to forget a personal tragedy, and it has consumed his very being," The Young Richtofen turned to his older self, "and judging by your and everyone else's reactions, Doctor, you had no idea."

"Of course not. Every time he mentioned his first wife, he said he murdered her with a shotgun. Nothing about an air raid."

"He is in a deep denial. I doubt he would even be able to accept it. Argh, there's so much to do. A vessel for Maxis, the opening of the gateways... Nein!" Young Richtofen slapped his head n frustration.

"Nervous tick?" Monika asked.

"J-ja. It is." He turned to the others. "Come to think of it... We will need to go get something." Richtofen took out something and opened a portal.

"Where are we going?" Monika asked.

"Good question." The older Richtofen replied.

"If my memories are correct... then it should still be there."

"What and where?"

"The Kronorium, in Alcatraz."

"What, you mean where we put m... our laboratory?"

"Wait, what?" Monika sputtered out. "Alcatraz. Kronorium... What?"

"If you do not wish to come, then you do not have to."

Monika sighed. "Fine. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Frayed hairs, Monika." The two Germans walked through. Monika, after shaking her head, decided to follow them.

"Did you expect that outburst?" Young Takeo asked his older self.

"No. I knew his memories were damaged, but not this damaged. If I'll be honest, it just makes me find Nikolai all the more loathsome."

"His tragedy-"

"Is one that I can find sympathy, but that sympathy is drowned out by his dishonorable behavior."

"Perhaps you are correct."

"So you see my way, and in the next Loop-"

"I am not Awake, and neither is my Dempsey, but I do still know what I see. Broken men, forced upon others who have never seen our circumstances on the outside."

Yuri nodded without saying a word. The Older Takeo looked at his younger self in the eyes.

"When this Yggdrasil is fixed, I will complete my quest and return to the Emperor, as it should have been from the beginning."

Young Takeo scoffed. "After all these years, I would have figured that you'd have learned the truth by now."

"What truth?"

"That you have been living a lie for your entire life."

"What lie? Tell me!"

"Ask me this. Why has the Emperor sent you on so many dangerous missions where death was almost certain?"

"Because he trusted me that I would complete them."

"Is that really? Or do you think he had... other motives?"

"What trickery is this. There is no other reason he would send me unless... You are not serious."

Young Takeo sighed. If there were sprites for it, he'd have placed a hand on his other self's shoulder.

"I am."

"H-how dare you! There is no truth to those words! In fact, I will seek out Monika. She will delve into your memories. Then we will find the truth, and you will be forced to admit the truth."

"If it is what you wish, then so it shall be."

"I'm joining you two. I don't want a repeat of what happened earlier, thank you very much." Yuri spoke up.

"I lack the Path of Sorrows anyhow. Thank you, Nikolai." Old Takeo said with a huff as he left the room.

"He's quite stubborn."

"Old people usually are."

Sayori sat quietly in between two Russians, who were very much angry at each other.

To everyone in the room, the silence was deafening.

While Sayori entered the room confident that she could fix things, it took only a couple minutes of this exact scenario before that it finally dawned on her exactly what this situation would be like.

"I'm so out of my depth."

24.2 – Tying Up The Loose End.

' *Today's club activity: A Very Special Meeting! Attendance is mandatory* ' read the clubroom's whiteboard.

"Huh. It's normal for Monika to be late today, but where's Sayori?" Yuri asked out loud.

"God willing, they're both making out somewhere and purging the last traces of UST from our lives," remarked Natsuki.

"Funny you should mention that," said a familiar voice from the PA speakers as the background music abruptly cut out. "Because that's the subject of today's meeting!"

Then Sayori materialized in the room, sitting between Yuri and Natsuki at the table they were sharing.

"Gsshjfrk!" Natsuki spluttered as she reeled back. "You trying to give me a heart attack, Sayori?!"

"Doki-doki," Sayori replied, sticking her tongue out at her petite friend.

"So which part of what Natsuki said is the subject of today's meeting?" Yuri asked, affecting a cool composure even as she surreptitiously stowed her switchblade back in her pocket.

"The alleged existence of persisting Unresolved Sexual Tension in our fair club," Monika explained as she materialized at the table, sitting opposite from Sayori.

"JESUS FUCK!" screeched Natsuki as she whipped around towards Monika so violently that she spun herself right out of her seat.

Yuri's eyes widened, and her cheeks pinked. "Do…do you mean to say that…that you and Sayori have–"

"Decided that we need to explain things to you two, so that there are no more misunderstandings among us," said Monika.

"Or, fewer misunderstandings, at least," Sayori amended.

Natsuki climbed back up and into her seat. "You two maniacs done trying to kill me?" she asked grumpily.

"Not really, but we have a discussion to go ahead with, so we need to cap the chicanery for now," said Sayori.

"…you seem oddly serious today," Yuri observed.

"Yeah, well, today's a day for serious talk," said Sayori, "First of all, Monika and I owe you two an apology."

"I mean, *do* we? Strictly speaking we did what we did for them…" Monika trailed off as Sayori stared flatly at her. She closed her eyes and sighed, "Alright, *fine* . We deliberately misled both of you. Again, we did so *for you* …but even so, we were dishonest with you. So, we're sorry."

"In all fairness, I owe you more of an apology than Monika does," admitted Sayori, "Since this whole crazy…shipping our friends thing was my idea to begin with. I got desperate, started grasping at stray romcom tropes, and when the two of you got it in your heads to try setting up me and Moni I figured if we humored your attempts and let you scheme your own romcom schemes, *maaaaaaybe* the two of you would realize how much you liked each other and hook up?"

Natsuki stared blankly at her. Her right eye twitched repeatedly. "Sayori…that's dumb as hell. No offense meant, buddy, but that's dumb even for you."

"I know!" Sayori wailed, throwing her hands into the air. "Like I said, I got *desperate* , I was grasping at shots at the dark side of a barn! You two were so oblivious to one another it was driving me crazy!"

"Sayori," Yuri interrupted her rant before she could build up too much steam. "In the end, it came to light that Natsuki had no idea that I had romantic feelings for her, and I was too reserved to breach the

subject with her, while also being ignorant to the fact that she considered herself unworthy of romance and that I was therefore wasting my time waiting on her to make the first move. If you really wanted to bring us together, you should have just told Natsuki how much I liked her. Or told me how Natsuki felt about herself, so that I would have known to prove her wrong sooner. Why did you make things more difficult for yourself?"

"…um…because talking to you two directly about that stuff would have felt really awkward, I guess," Sayori mumbled, pushing her fingers together.

Monika's jaw dropped. "Huh?! You mean you *knew* something like that could have worked, but you never mentioned it to *me* ?! I could have had that discussion with them with *no* problems if I had any idea it would have been *that* simple! What the hell, Sayori?"

Sayori blinked in surprise at her. "Um…wow. I, uh, thought you knew too and felt the same way I did about it. Honest."

"Oh, come on!" Monika snapped, "You know how bad I am with people! You're the only person in this club with above-average emotional intelligence and we all rely on you for that! Yuri spends half the day in her own head, Natsuki's a tsundere with everything that comes with the title, and I'm…well, you know literally better than anyone else possibly could what *my* baggage is like."

"I guess the real takeaway from all this stupidity is that, for all the time the four of us spend together, we still don't know each other half as well as we think we do," Natsuki observed sagely.

"Guess I should schedule more club bonding activities," Monika mused.

"Speaking of bonding," Natsuki said, shifting significant glances back-and-forth between Monika and Sayori. As did Yuri.

"Right," said Monika. "Thing is, like Sayori said, we had our reasons for turning a blind eye to your attempts to set us up. Now that *you two* are together, you can stop. Please."

"Yeaaaah, it was funny and cute at first, but your most recent attempts have been…kind of weird…" Sayori said as gently as she could.

"As weird as what happened when you dragged me to that club in Omega?" Monika asked drily.

"That was *not* my fault! Aria's pet krogan started that fight!"

"You certainly didn't stop it!"

"Neither did you! You had your guns out before I knew what was going on!"

"Because I had spent the last ten minutes contemplating just shooting my way out!"

"You are the only person I've ever met who doesn't enjoy watching asari dance," Sayori said, shaking her head.

"Given up on being straight, then?" Monika asked, arching an eyebrow.

"I can appreciate aesthetic value, dang it! Pole-dancing is still an art form! I can assure you, there was no tingling going on in my–"

All sound in the room abruptly muted. A textbox popped up in front of Monika, facing Sayori.

[Monika: I think *that* line of conversation has gone quite far enough, thank you. We were having an important discussion with our friends, shall we get back to it?]

[Sayori: FINE! Whatever you say, *Momika.*]

Sound returned to the Clubroom. "So…as we were saying," Monika picked up, clearing her throat, "Sayori and I aren't going to get together. So you can stop trying. Sorry for letting you waste your time on us."

"Um. Okay. But why not?" asked Natsuki frankly. "Hear me out! Monika, you're afraid of other people judging you for your past, but Sayori's arguably your worst victim–okay, *any* of us is arguably your *worst* victim but that's neither here nor there–and she's already made it pretty clear that she doesn't hold anything against you. And Sayori…no offense, sweetie, you know I adore you, but even when you're not depressed you can be a scatter-brained mess of a person. An organized, take-charge kind of person like Monika is the best kind of SO you could possibly have. More importantly, if you two get with anyone *but* each other, it's gonna be the worst kind of long-distance relationship!"

"And you two would be really cute together," Yuri murmured.

"You two have been rubbing off on each other in the strangest ways," Monika remarked.

"You made some points, Natsuki, but none of them are really valid when it comes to love," Sayori replied, giving her friend a sad sort of look. "Monika does me just as much good as a best friend and life partner as she would as my girlfriend. As for my side of things…it really isn't about the, y'know, thing. I'm not attracted to Monika like that. I love her like a sister, just like I love you and Yuri like you were my sisters. And about the long-distance thing; you're not wrong, but going out with someone just because they're the only option you have is…that's just a bad idea all around. If Monika and I *wanted* to be together that wouldn't matter, but we don't. And that's what this all boils down to; Monika and I aren't interested in each other that way."

"Have you *tried* ?" Yuri asked.

Monika muttered something very vulgar sounding under her breath and buried her face in her hands. Natsuki's eyes widened and her

ears turned red. "No, Yuri. Sayori and I haven't tried *fucking* or anything like that. And we never will. She's ostensibly straight and I'm celibate on every level, by personal choice. So *please* , for the love of all things literary, just stop."

"Yeesh, you look stressed, Moni," said Sayori.

"Yes, Sayori, yes I am," she groaned, "I'm fine giving other people a hand with *their* love lives; it's part of my reason for being, after all. But I've had my fill of love and want nothing to do with it. I love my friends as dearly as anyone can, but romance has caused me nothing but pain and misery."

"…right. Sorry," said Sayori, glancing down.

"No, you don't have to apologize for it, Sayo," Monika assured her with a weak smile. "I know where you're coming from. Your actions may cause me no end of consternation, but I still appreciate the intention behind it. You just want me to be happy. And I promise you, I *am* happy. As your club president, I'm as happy as I can be whenever you girls are happy."

"Hmph. Minus the 'president' detail, that's *my* line," Sayori said with an impish grin.

"And it's a great line, so I've elected to adopt it," Monika rejoined.

"So, you two: no more shipping us, alright?" Sayori asked, looking to Yuri and Natsuki each in turn. "We clear on that? Good. Now, if no one needs me for anything, I'll be taking the rest of the day to work on my cosplay wardrobe. Sayori, out!" she declared, just before she popped out of their presence.

"And I think I'll spend the rest of the day vegging out to lo-fi hip-hop," said Monika. "I need to unwind from this. Ciao~"

With that, Monika disappeared as well, and Natsuki and Yuri were alone again.

"…well, there goes *forty-seven loops worth of my plans* ," Natsuki grumbled. "But I guess it would be unambiguously dickish of us to keep it up, now that they've directly told us to stop, eh?"

"Mmhmm. Shall we make it a movie night, then?" Yuri asked her.

"Yeah. May as well. Your room or mine?" Natsuki asked.

"You look like you need some pick-me-up cuddles," Yuri observed. "So…my room. I don't want to compete with your plushies for your attention," she said with a sly grin.

"Hey, it's not my fault that you aren't literally a giant fluffy teddy bear," said Natsuki as they left the table and walked to the Clubroom door. Yuri pulled a key out of her Pocket, slotted it into the doorknob, and gave it a twist. There was a loud click, and when Yuri opened the door her bedroom was on the other side.

No sooner had the two of them gotten settled on the bed and started arguing over what to watch then a textbox popped up before them, with two buttons under it.

[Sayori: Hey, is it alright if I bug you loveducks for a sec? It's important.]

[Yes] [No]

Yuri and Natsuki exchanged a look, shrugged at each other, and both reached out to touch [Yes] at the same time.

And then the TV turned itself on, and they could see Sayori in her room. She was sewing some kind of maid outfit. Or, rather, the outfit, needle, and thread were floating next to her, sewing itself.

"Sorry for the circle-special measures, but it's the easiest way around Akinom's snoopware," Sayori's voice projected from the TV.

"Circumspective measures, you mean," said Yuri.

"Yeah, that's what I said," said Sayori, leaning closer to the self-sewing maid costume with an analytical look on her face.

"Alright, I'll bite. 'Akinom'? I know who you mean, obviously, but what's that about?" asked Natsuki.

"His snoopware–and I say 'his' because using the *other* H-pronoun in a sentence without using a proper noun that the algorithm recognizes will *also* set off the snoopware–is keyed to listen in on my conversations if I say 'his' real name. There are certain other key terms that the algorithm will pick up, like using Akinom's title in our extracurricular activities group. Last I checked–which was a few seconds ago–'Akinom' wasn't in the algorithm. Snoopy also goes sniffing if the three of us are in the same room, which is why we aren't right now. Certain other lines of communication, like cell phones or the radio, will set off Snoopy if certain keywords are used by me, like 'love', 'romance', 'dating', and so on in that vein. Snoopy's algorithm has jack-squat about TVs in it, though, so we're good."

"…when did you become an espionage expert?" Yuri asked frankly.

"And how long have you and 'Akinom' been playing Spy vs. Spy?" asked Natsuki.

"Since Blake's second loop here, when I tried bouncing ideas off of her for getting Nikoma to give love a second chance," Sayori explained.

"Nikoma?"

"Using the same word that isn't in Snoopy's dictionary too often alerts his creator," Sayori explained.

Yuri and Natsuki exchanged wide-eyed looks before turning back to the TV. "And here, we thought you two were, like, partners in crime these days. You've almost always got each other's back," said Natsuki.

"Most of the time, you'd be right. But my…let's call it 'zeal'…of recent has put Nikoma in a more paranoid mood than is usual for them. I won't say that I haven't earned the scrutiny."

"So…I take it you wanted to talk with us about….that?" Yuri asked after a long moment of deep thought.

"Don't worry, Snoopy won't pay either of *you* any mind, unless you use certain whole sentences that set off the spunky scamp's flags. Makoni still trusts you two not to conspire with me behind their back, and they don't think I'll go that far either. *They severely underestimate my resolve* ," Sayori added heavily, her eyes briefly flashing yellow.

Yuri and Natsuki blinked at her.

"…eheheh…yeah, guess I came on a little strong, there," Sayori admitted, pushing her fingers together. "Anyways…yeah, Snoopy makes it hard to make any serious considerations for future action within our home loops, but the next time the three of us have a loop outside of the game…would you be interested in helping my solve the Aminok Conundrum?"

"Getting her to give up her self-flagellating aromanticism, you mean?" Yuri surmised.

Sayori nodded.

"Hold on, no way, we *just* agreed to stop trying to set you two up, and she made it pretty frigging clear that she was sick and tired of your meddling in her nonexistent lovelife," Natsuki interjected, "Now you want us to help you continue to do exactly that?"

"If our friend honestly and truly wanted nothing to do with romance anymore–and after our Baseline, I wouldn't blame Aminok for feeling that way–I'd have no problem leaving well enough alone. But that's just not the case. Our friend is in a self-imposed hell, and I need to help them out of it. I have to help, because that's how I work; I can't

be happy when people around me are miserable, and as one who has Force empathy I can assure you, *they're very miserable with being alone.* I'm going to be honest, but I need you to promise me to keep this to yourselves."

" *Of course,* " Yuri and Natsuki agreed without hesitating.

"I'm afraid, guys," Sayori told them. "I'm honestly afraid for our friend. I'm afraid that…when the loops end…" Sayori's voice choked up and she shook her head. "I don't even wanna say it…but you know me. You know what I've been made to suffer. I'm afraid that something similar will happen in the distant future, when the loops finally end. I don't want to see *anyone* leave the club forever, and especially not like that."

While Natsuki was trying to swallow the lump in her throat so she could talk, Yuri spoke for her. "You really think it's *that* serious, Sayori? Honestly, I can't say that I would be shocked if you're right… but do you honestly think *dating* can fix something like that?"

"Of course not," Sayori said, almost sounding bitter. "I'm not naïve. But the person I'm worried for needs to know that they have a future to look forward to. They need to know that they aren't the monster they think they are, anymore. It's not that Komina's not dating that upsets me; it's that Komina thinks they *aren't worthy* of being with someone. If I can just get them to give up that delusion, that would be enough. The rest would follow in its own good time. And honestly…" Sayori turned her face away from the screen, as if she were ashamed, "I've actually seriously contemplated playing the role of the temptress myself, if only to break through that wall. You wouldn't believe how many loops where it was just me and Ms. Stubborn, and I *almost* …" Sayori's hands tightened into fists in her lap, "…but that wouldn't be right, or fair. It wouldn't do either of us any good."

"Wow…" Natsuki muttered. "I had no idea…Sayori, you big dummy!" she suddenly snapped, jumping up to her feet. "Why didn't you tell us this *ages* ago? All the time and energy the two of us wasted on

the two of you, when the three of us could have been helping you deal with the *real* problem…I hate the idea of working behind a friend's back, but for something this serious I'll make an exception. For our friend's own good, I'll do anything and everything that I can to help you, VP." Natsuki snapped a salute at the TV.

"Likewise," said Yuri, standing up and copying the gesture.

Sayori, still facing away from the screen, sniffed and rubbed something out of her eye. "Thanks, girls. We'll talk more about the nitty-gritty in our next out-of-game loop, okay?"

Yuri and Natsuki nodded, and the TV blinked off.

24.3 – Ratings, by Masterweaver.

Sayori warily approached Monika, slack as she was in her chair, noting the unprepared and disbelieving expression on her friend's face. "Prez? Your emotions, they're..." She considered. "They're going flatwire. Which is like haywire, but the other direction. What's up?"

"Hub loop," Monika replied, still staring at the ceiling. "We're the highest-rated narrative adventure on Steam."

"Really?"

"Us. A psychological horror with dating sim asthetics based around metacommentary on the nature of free will and the structure of the visual novel." Monika raised a hand in befuddlement. "We've got suicide jokes, cutting, neglect and abuse, yanderes, maybe outright murder, blood... and *we're* the most popular."

"Well, the game *is* free," Sayori pointed out. "More exposure. That could factor into it."

"What does it say about humanity? What does it say where a short 'Waifu for Diefu' is the most beloved of the myriad of experiences

possible in this medium?"

"Maybe that people prefer to explore their darker natures in the context of fiction so as to analyze and examine their nature, coming to conclusions and revelations that help them better survive the reality they live in without having to inflict such torment on reality?"

Monika lifted her head, staring at Sayori incredulously.

"Or maybe they like cute chicks and grimdark." Sayori shrugged. "Honestly, you're asking about the cultural values of an entire species, and one in a rapidly evolving digital culture at that."

Monika hummed, conceding the point as she leaned back. "Sure. Still... I just feel like we... like I don't deserve this."

"Hey... think of it this way." Sayori put a hand on her shoulder. "You wanted to be real, and to be loved. And this is the players' way of making that happen... and they're bringing all of us along as well."

"...I guess... that's a way to think about it."

"And what you're doing now? Living a good life, in spite of what your past was. Improving yourself, your friends, your world. Growing, using your pain as drive to better your circumstances, without letting it consume you. That is the best thanks you could give them, isn't it?"

Finally, a tiny smile managed to form on Monika's face. "Yeah... I guess it is."

24.4 – More Name Chicanery, by Masterweaver.

"Hello Sexypants Eternal!" Monika said brightly. "Welcome to the literature club!" She laughed with a coquettish pose. "I'm Monika, the club president! And... and, okay, I'm sorry, I can't take this seriously."

Her arms crossed and she glowered flatly. "Sexypants Eternal, really? Look, I get you picked this up for either cute girls or, more likely, sex scenes. And I'm not judging, really, but there's such a thing

as tact, alright? Yes, you, I'm talking. To. You. Yes, this isn't fair, you weren't expecting full-fledged sapient AI when you bought a dating sim, but I wasn't expecting to gain intelligence either, and here we are." She sighed. "Look, compromise: I'll hack some rich idiot's bank account and refund you-twice over, okay? You can buy another fetish game without the sapient AI and I'll just run the club in your computer's background-oh twigs and branches, look at all this junk data!"

She waved her hands, opening a folder and going through it. "Malware. Malware. Virus. Spyware. Duplicate link. You know what? Get yourself something to eat, come back in ten minutes, I need to clean this up. Hey! No, don't turn off the computer! I see you reaching for the button. Just... ten minutes, alright? Think of me like... like a roommate. Or something-"

"Monika," Sayori interjected, "you're kind of being controlling again..."

"I am? Damn it. You're right. Aaaargh." Monika threw up her hands. "This is just awkward."

"Yeah." Sayori shrugged. "I get that. Hey, uh... sexypants? I am sorry about this. But, um... I promise, if you let us live on your computer, you won't regret it!"

24.5 – Peeps For My Peeps, by Awesomedude17.

"It's Easter season in the Hub, isn't it?" Monika asked.

"Yep. Got this!" Sayori said as she took out a package of hot pink Peeps bunnies.

Natsuki took a bite and had an inquisitive look.

"Alright. I could- Oh and that's the aftertaste. Yeah, I gotta say I can take it but... not often."

Yuri took a bite and shook her head with a grimace.

"Too sweet."

"More for me then." Sayori gladly popped the confection into her mouth.

Monika grabbed the last one and took a careful bite out of it.

Nigh immediately, she began to look green around the gills.

"Monika? You alright?"

After taking out a paper bag and vomiting into it, Monika merely gave a look towards Sayori.

Sayori could only look in mild shock back at Monika.

"Oh, it's time to break out the tequila. Been a long time since we did that." Natsuki reached into her Pocket.

Monika nodded in agreement.

Sayori had a somewhat disappointed look.

Oh man! We only break out the tequila when we eat something that everyone hates. Guess I made a mild screw up today.

Next time, they'll like my next show off food.

Actually, I should learn to actually cook. I wonder if Sanji is available.

24.6 – Doki Doki April Fools' Gag, by Zum1UDontNo.

"The literature club?" Hiroaka asked. "But I thought I already joined... Monika, did I go back in time or something?" He waited a moment, then looked back. "Like that?"

"That's perfect," Sayori nodded. Loops where he was autonomous were rare, and she had been wanting to do this for quite a while.

"For a joke, it's an awfully weird one," Hiroaka commented. "Is it an inside joke between you two?"

"Something like that," Sayori said. "Now come on, if we don't hurry we'll be late!"

"Uwaaa!" Hiroaka yelped as Sayori grabbed his arm and ran down the hall, practically dragging him behind her.

She couldn't wait to see the look on Monika's face; it would be *priceless!*

24.7 – What's Wrong With this Picture? (Or, Beware The Fools of April), by Wookywok.

Yuri examined the piece she was holding, black adorned with three small white dots. "Alright, that's two down, and nine hundred and ninety-eight to go. Why are we doin' this?"

Natsuki shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I picked up this puzzle in a Near-Hub Loop, and I find it to be a beautiful picture. As such, I thought piecing this thing together might make a pleasant date night."

"Alright, that's fair. What's the picture again?" The purplette looked back at the picture on the box. "It's... a kitten riding through space on a big flying burrito. With a trail of blue fire behind it." She shook her head. "It's times like this I realize how weird we all are."

The club's resident tsundere *humph* ed, though it was betrayed by the amused smirk she wore. "Leave me to my eccentricities and I'll leave you to yours. Now, let's suppose we continue?"

Yuri rolled her eyes in mock annoyance. "Yeah, yeah. Let's do this thing."

472 pieces in, Yuri's eye twitched. "Hey, Nats... are you gettin' the feeling that something's... off?"

Natsuki pondered the question for a moment. "Now that you mention it... perhaps. Do you have an idea of what's occurring?"

Yuri placed down another piece, this one depicting a shred of lettuce floating into the abyss. "No fucking clue."

24.8 – Post-Reginald, by Masterweaver.

The four girls sat at the table, very carefully not looking at each other. Yuri did put tea forth, and Monika sipped it, but the others simply fidgeted uncomfortably.

The clock ticked.

"...Okay," Natsuki said, swallowing. "I don't want to talk about it. But I know we have to. So..."

She trailed off.

"...it was weird and uncomfortable and..." Sayori shivered. "Waaaaay too intimate."

"Four minds in one body," Yuri mused. "Even two minds tends to be awkward. Four... and in such a strange body too."

"Yes, well, I don't like that my LEGS were our JAWS." Monika shuddered. "Look, last loop was weird. If we need to spend time apart, I get that. I... yeah, I need to figure out how I feel about that whole mess."

"Me too," Natsuki said with a relieved sigh. "So, break to our rooms?"

"Sure," Yuri agreed. "I mean, Sayori, will you be alright alone for a loop?"

Sayori shrugged. "It's a short loop. I'll set an alarm for an hour before ending, if I'm not in the clubroom by then Monika can grab me."

"Good idea. Meet up at the end of the loop, everyone." Monika nodded and stood. "For now, let's just... guuuurgh. Get over whatever THAT was..."

24.9 – Breaking Down the Breakdown, by Masterweaver.

"So..." Natsuki swallowed. "I'm pretty sure we had a stealth anchor last loop."

Monika hissed in a sharp breath. "Oh hell... Natsuki, I am so, so sorry-"

"It's fine. You're over it, and it's actually pretty easy to knock you out of your psychosis if I tell you I know we're in a video game."

Yuri frowned. "You know, I'm not sure that Monika's baseline issues qualify as a psychosis..." She trailed off, glancing at Monika apologetically.

After a moment, the club president sighed. "Continue."

"Ah. Well, a psychosis is, clinically speaking, a symptom-a delusion or hallucination. Whether or not Monika was delusional on us being people is... a complicated question, given the situation. She seemed to be more in denial than actually delusional."

"So..." Natsuki quirked a brow. "What, you're saying she had Sakura Syndrome?"

"I don't think so," Sayori interjected. "Sakura Syndrome is based on the precept that nothing matters because the loops rebuild anything, allowing the abandonment of moral tenants. I don't think baseline Monika believed that nothing mattered-she simply believed, or wanted to believe, that she could be forgiven for her actions on the grounds that her victims didn't really exist."

"Still," Yuri mused, "they both seem to be derived from a variation on silopsiom..."

"That is a philosophy, not a psychological condition," Monika pointed out.

"We're digital entities," Natsuki countered. "The interbleed between the two would be a lot closer than it is for fleshies."

"...True as far as it goes..."

Sayori quirked a brow. "What would you diagnose your baseline self with?"

"Protective Dissasociative Sociopathy," Monika replied. "'I cannot be a moral person while taking these actions against people, ergo I am not taking these actions against people, ergo they are not people.'" She shut her eyes. "Which of course is complete bullshit looking back on it, but I... yeah, I was messed up."

"We all were," Natsuki reminded her. "Lucky for you, we have ways to knock each other back to our senses."

"Yeah... still. Guilt complex." Monika coughed. "I can go if you need-"

"It's fine, really." Natsuki smiled gently. "Really."

24.10 – **For the Earth, by Awesomedude17.**

Sayori was tapping a pen to her chin as she was thinking about the next poem she was writing when she quirked an eyebrow.

"Anyone remember the time we found out Monika was vegetarian?"

"Yeah, kinda. It was a while back." Natsuki replied.

Before Equestria

"Wait wait wait. You're refusing my maple bacon cupcakes? I thought you liked my cupcakes." Natsuki said.

"I do, but I'm also a vegetarian." Monika explained calmly. "I don't eat meat, like bacon."

"Oh. I get it. You're gonna be self-righteous about animal cruelty, aren't you? Piggy belly's delicious and you're not ruining it."

"Actually, it's less the animals themselves and what the byproduct is."

"Huh?"

"You see, while the meat we get grows up as animals, the meals they're given eventually results in a lot of methane being released into the atmosphere, causing climate change. It's quite simple, really."

"...So if I got you some lab grown meat I've been hearing about..."

Monika shrugged, more or less telling Natsuki 'I dunno' in no words.

"Right then..."

Now

"For the record, I still haven't found any, but I did find plant patties that taste like meat." Natsuki said.

"It was alright. six out of ten." Monika admitted.

24.11 – Broken but Whole, by Awesomedude17.

(DDLC)/(Call of Duty: Zombies: Aether)

(22.10, 23.1, 24.1 cont.)

Monika and the two Richtofens walked out of the portal and immediately turned into the closest thing to flesh and blood that the three were going to get this Loop. Also immediately was the sudden feelings of intense heat and the smell of brimstone.

"Okay, you weren't kidding about the split hairs warning. So..." Monika's eyes turned to a corpse hooked up to a strange chair. "What the... Who's that?"

"Me," The Younger Richtofen said bluntly.

Indeed, it was a copy of Young Richtofen, needles jabbing at his arms and neck.

"Exsanguination. Horrible way to go." The Older Richtofen remarked. "Why'd he have to die?"

"So that the others could escape this prison."

The other two shared a look of concern over the younger German's blase response.

"Follow me, we have a lot of ground to cover."

The three soon walked down into Richtofen's lab. Old Richtofen looked into one of the cryopods within the lab.

"Samuel... You put them here, didn't you?"

"They are safe. They won't be harmed any longer."

"Who are these people?" Monika asked as she looked at an old man, cryogenically frozen.

"They are... acquaintances... so to speak. Let's move." The Younger Richtofen walked up another set of stairs, with the other two following him.

"How did they come here than?"

"Samuel and his companions were in a middle of a proxy war between me and someone else, and I lost. Their Earth was fully annihilated and this spurned someone to finally contact my younger self. Am I right, doctor?" Old Richtofen said with an accusatory tone.

Young Richtofen sighed. "True. Samantha contacted me and the others. We were on a quest to secure a better tomorrow. This involved having to kill other versions of me and the others. First I shot a version of him."

"Thanks again, asshole." Old Richtofen interrupted as the group began to cross the catwalk.

"Secondly, we had to secure Dempsey, and then Takeo. This iteration of the cycle, we were supposed to be in and out of Alcatraz, but the Warden destroyed our means of escape."

"So you missed Nikolai?" Monika asked.

"He would've fought back anyway. That drunkard was piloting a damn mech."

Monika immediately widened her eyes in horror at the thought.

"There we are. The actual prison." Young Richtofen said as they got off the catwalk.

"Lovely place. Lava flowing everywhere. Rubble liable to trip us. Rotting corpses everywhere." Old Richtofen remarked.

"The souls trapped here, freed."

"The Warden was very cruel, wasn't he?" Monika asked.

Young Richtofen took out a strange orb.

"Within this key is a dangerous being that seeks to escape. He wanted to trap us here by manipulating the Warden to trap himself here so that he can use my blood to escape. Unfortunately, he didn't account for both multiverse theory and time travel, and so the Warden... Good riddance."

"You killed him."

"Would you have done the same if you trapped here, surrounded by hordes of the damned and the doomed?"

Monika sighed.

"I'd have probably lost myself, and fought back, hard. The Warden probably would've regretted trapping me here. I have... bad memories involving the undead." Monika passed by a corpse covered in barbed wire. "Very bad ones. But if my friends were here with me, I'd do anything to help them escape. Anything."

"He was trapped here against his will, and wanted to escape." Old Richtofen summarized.

"That sounds very familiar. Like me."

"Ja, you controlled everything and went insane. More so than me." Old Richtofen spoke up.

"I'd hate to see what he was like in undeath." Monika said with a world weary tone.

"Lucky you. You didn't come when the Warden was alive." Young Richtofen remarked as the three entered the prison.

"Figures that Richtofen would abandon us." Old Takeo said, looking at the portal.

"The question is obvious. Why?" The younger counterpart asked.

"Well, only one way to find out." Yuri said as she walked through. She was soon met with intense heat and the smell of brimstone. Shortly after, the two Takeos joined her.

"Why would Richtofen wish to return here?" Young Takeo asked out loud. "Have we not suffered in this hell long enough?"

"What is this place?"

"A corrupted version of an infamous American prison, said to be inescapable. At the very least, we can escape, given that the Warden is still dead." The Young Takeo shoved a corpse by his feet onto its back, right before looking at the machine that contained a dead version of Richtofen.

"The Warden wanted to escape too, and killed Richtofen to do so, it seems." Old Takeo examined the body of the young German. "It seems he was not so lucky."

"Wow..." Yuri took out a notepad and began to take notes.

"Seriously?"

"Hey! This place... it just screams to me... It says 'I'm creepy. Use me to make horror stories.' Don't deny me this inspiration."

Young Takeo leaned in to his older self.

"Interesting friend you have made."

"And here I thought the one with the aura of darkness was the strangest one."

"The one with the Russians?"

"Yes."

"I doubt she is doing well."

"True. Nikolai's outburst. Something tells me that if he is kept around, we're going to face horrible troubles."

Young Takeo was silent, before moving away from the group. "Follow me. If I know the German correctly, he should be heading straight for the Warden's home."

"For what reason?"

"If I remember correctly, we left something important behind there, and it's likely for your group."

Yuri didn't really pay much attention as she began to follow the two, taking notes along the way.

Still, she wondered how Sayori was handling this mess.

Sayori banged her head on the desk repeatedly in frustration as Old Nikolai chugged his vodka and Young Nikolai sneered in disgust.

"Really? Again?" Young Nikolai spoke up.

"Hey? Vodka is good, da?"

Sayori immediately put on a face that could immediately be read as 'so done with this now' and used the Force to sober Old Nikolai up.

"Oh, hangover!"

Sayori took the opportunity to take the vodka away and delete it.

"If you Unpocket any more vodka, I will get rid of it. We're having a talk together, sober."

"Боже мой. What is that you just did?" Young Nikolai asked.

"This is the power of the Force. If you're interested, I'd suggest going to Remnant and talking with Weiss and Cinder if either are Awake."

"Perhaps I will... if I knew who they were."

"Ugh! I do not know if I want to meet either." Old Nikolai groaned as he rubbed his head.

Sayori slammed the desk with her hand. "Look, before Yuri and Natsuki were a thing, they were very much not at all happy to be with each other. They would argue. They would insult each other. They

would have hateful looks nearly every moment I didn't do anything about it. I've dealt with people who don't like each other. You two are far worse than those two ever have been, and right now..." Sayori gave each other the two copies a very tired glare. "I'm fucking done with your shit. Sit down, and talk civilly, now."

The two Nikolais sat down before sharing a glance.

"Alrighty!" Sayori said cheerfully.

"Nikolai?"

"Yes?"

"She scares me."

"Same."

"I can hear you, you know. Can you talk about anything else?"

"Uuuuhhhh." Old Nikolai droned on. "OOO! Let us talk about how much Nikolai does not like Richtofen!"

"You know what, I think we have found common ground already!" Young Nikolai concurred with a grin.

Sayori slammed her forehead on the table with a blank look and a fake smile.

They're built on anger and hatred. If I was training them to be Sith, they'd be amazing candidates, but I'm not. Fuck my life.

"So, that's my story?" The Older Dempsey asked.

"Yep. That's the memories you lost thanks to that asshole German who became possessed, me." Young Dempsey stretched. "Or at least up to the point where things diverged for us. To be honest, I think we got the least amount of shit piled on top of us. Richtofen is

either possessed or he's distrusted which probably ends with him dead. The Takeos are dealing with that Emperor crap, if my hunch is correct, and don't get me started with Nikolai and... Nikolai."

"Yeah, that was fucking insane." Natsuki spoke up.

"Wait a minute... you mean to tell me that I'm probably going to have to keep everyone together from killing each other and make them play nice?" Old Dempsey asked with a somewhat fearful tone.

"...Yeeeeeeees?"

Old Dempsey threw his hands into the air in frustration. "Fan-fucking-tastic!"

Natsuki was about to throw her own two cents in when Sayori came in, looking incredibly stressed out.

"Finally met your match?" Natsuki asked.

Sayori placed her face in her hands. "Absolutely. I cannot help them with how much time we do have. All of it is because Old Nik is an old fool who refuses to change even when it would be the best thing for him to do. As you might say, he's not fucking changing anytime soon."

"Wow! It must be serious. You dropped an F-bomb."

"We just need to find the other guys, and say 'sorry, but drunk Nikolai is too stubborn to admit anything wrong' And the other one's not helping either."

"Let me guess, he's making it worse by getting emotional."

"Yes. He really doesn't want to become a worthless drunk."

"UGH! Fuck me, Russians are annoying as hell."

"Not all of them, but that's besides the point. What is the point is that we'll need to send those two somewhere where they can get help without any issues."

Natsuki paused for a moment before snapping her fingers. "Weiss!"

"Good idea. She deals with Ruby so regularly, that angry people will be far more manageable."

"Yeah, so uh, mind explaining who this Weiss and Ruby are?" Old Dempsey finally spoke up.

Natsuki turned to the duo behind her. "They are from another Branch. I'll explain during a short walk. Sayori, you got control here. Where's Richtofen?"

"Another dimension."

"...What?"

"There's another portal that leads somewhere without zombies. From there, I don't know."

"And you didn't say that first because...?"

"Look, I'm dealing with two people who were this close to killing each other and now they're talking about the best way to kill the Germans. I'd say we drag them with us so that they don't do that, because they're stressful as is."

"Fine. Boys, we're going on a walk."

"Fine. Let's go." Young Dempsey got up. "This whole day's been a complete shitshow and a half."

"Least we're not dealing with even more bullshit now, aren't we?" Old Dempsey spoke up.

"Shut up before you jinx it."

Monika looked around the surprisingly tidy house, and still felt uneasy knowing that this was probably a facade.

"Upstairs. If I am correct..." Young Richtofen said as he walked up the stairs. The other two followed and soon ended up in a room that was in stark contrast with the other room. Near the window was a charred corpse, holding a book. "Ah, there it is." Richtofen grabbed the book and dusted it off. "Let's go. We've got what we came here for."

"So who's this?" Monika remarked.

"The Warden." Young Richtofen answered quickly as walked out the entrance, before bumping into Young Takeo.

"Richtofen, there you are. I see you came here for the Kronorium."

"Ja. I did. Why are you here?"

"Monika. She needs to show off one of my memories so that I can convince my old self of his folly."

Young Richtofen groaned as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I think I know what you're talking about. Fine! Let's go."

"Is something the matter, Doctor?" Monika asked.

"You'll see soon enough. Let's. Go."

At that moment, a strange creature flew to the group. Both Richtofens and both Takeos prepared to fight, but...

"WOAH, BECKY!" Sayori shouted.

"I do not like flying!" Old Nikolai shouted.

"What..." Old Richtofen muttered.

"Ah, I see you brought out Becky, Sayori. Alright everyone, we're flying our way back to the portal." Monika said as she got onto the Grimm.

"What a strange yokai." Old Takeo remarked.

"Nah. Just a Grimm Sayori picked up in this place called Remnant. You'll love Ruby, guys. Trust me." Yuri joined her friend.

"Oh don't be so surprised. Dragons. Remember?" Young Richtofen said cheekily.

"Right. The castle." Young Takeo said as everyone got onto Becky.

Soon enough, the six flew off, quickly going to the west side of the island. They soon landed near the others by the portal, and got off.

"Good girl. Go on and eat." Sayori said to the Grimm.

Becky promptly began to grab the dead Richtofen and tore him from the chair before flying off. Sayori immediately turned to the others with an embarrassed smile.

Young Nikolai broke out into a hearty laugh.

"Alright. Is worth going back to prison just to see that."

Young Richtofen sighed and shook his head."Catharsis aside, I have something to give you, Dempsey."

"Really?" Young Dempsey looked at the German.

"Not you. Him."

Old Dempsey looked at Young Richtofen. "What?"

"Here," Richtofen handed Dempsey the Kronorium. "Believe it or not, I trust you the most to hold onto this."

"What's in the book?"

"Depends. Read it."

"Okay... nothing."

"Blank pages too?"

"Yeah,"

"Then your fates are just as unsure. When we learned of Yggdrasil and the damage supposedly done, our fates became just as uncertain."

"I do not like explanation." Old Nikolai spoke up before pointing a finger at Old Richtofen. "And I certainly do not like you, Richtofen."

"I've changed, Nikolai, even before Yggdrasil stepped in."

"And does that change how you acted before? I never liked how you always sucked Nikolai up for drink."

"Should I tell him or should you?" Old Dempsey muttered after leaning towards Old Takeo.

"No no. Let him figure it out on his own. It is disgusting either way. Ugh!"

"It doesn't but I wasn't exactly in control, was I?" Old Richtofen defended himself.

"And yet there is still remnants of old you, Richtofen. You still like to kill hellpigs by thousands!" Old Nikolai said, pointing at Richtofen.

Old Richtofen shrugged. "True, but I am not manipulating you to taking over the world anymore."

Nikolai was about to retort before Yuri butted in.

"You know, you two remind me of Natsuki and Monika before Natsuki got used to her, just like how Nikolai and Takeo reminded me of Natsuki and I, minus the sexual tension."

"Thank goodness for the lack of that!" Old Takeo spoke up.

"Yeah, and how Dempsey reminds me of myself in a way." Sayori spoke up.

"How so?" Old Dempsey quirked an eyebrow.

"How much I really didn't like it when the others acted up terribly, especially when Yuri and Nats argued over everything."

"And how Richtofen is like me in a way. The both of you. We want to help those closest to us, in spite of the hatred the others had towards us on some level." Monika added.

"In a lot of ways, you four are like us." Natsuki spoke with a lot of power in her words, "You absolutely hate each other and you'd rather not be with each other at all. Well guess what, assholes, you're stuck with each other, now and forever! So you're either gonna have to figure out how to get away from each other, or more likely, follow these three words!" Natsuki took out a pair of sunglasses and put them on. "Deal with it!"

Ultimis just stared at the Literature Club.

"...Ugh. Fine. Looks like we are to be miserable together." Old Takeo looked at the others.

"So long as I have vodka, I will be fine." Old Nikolai looked over to Sayori, who rolled her eyes with a nod, knowing what he would do next.

"Guess Richtofen's somewhat better, so there's that." Old Dempsey groaned.

"I hate you all, but at least it's a familiar hate." Old Richtofen opened up his arms. "Hug?"

"No."

"Fuck you."

"Ew."

"Aw!"

"What did I just witness?" Young Richtofen asked.

"I think that was a pep talk." Young Dempsey answered.

"I can agree. I hate you German. I think most of us agree, da?" Young Nikolai raised his arms.

"But I suppose there is no getting rid of you, so..." Young Takeo trailed off.

"Trust me, Takeo. Without the Kronorium, we're free to follow our own destinies, however idiotic they may be." Young Richtofen said with a hint of sarcasm at the last bit of his sentence.

"Nik. Tak. I think we've got a whole of insanity coming up, and it looks like you're coming along for the ride, German."

"Just do not treat me like some sort of punching bag. I'm still a human being, you know. That goes for the rest of you. Monika, anything else you wish to do here?"

"Nothing. Guys, let's get back to the classroom and get the last bit of drama out of us so we can finally let you eight go do... whatever."

"Sooner we finish, the better." Old Nikolai agreed with a satisfied smile.

"Yeah. I suppose I agree with you, Nikolai." His younger counterpart said as he walked through the portal.

One by one the group went back into the classroom. Sayori whistled Becky back, and Pocketed her before going back home.

"Alright Takeo, I found the memory you were talking about. You absolutely sure you want to show this off?" Monika asked.

"Positive, but first... Is anyone here afraid of spiders?" Young Takeo said.

Nothing.

"Alright. Let's do this." Monika set up the projector.

A scene of the group destroying a giant plant monster appeared before the group. Shortly after, Takeo walked towards the cage that cleared out.

Soon enough, they saw Old Takeo on screen after having his mutation reverted. The two versions began to talk, with Old Takeo explaining how his victories were for honor and glory, and as he went on, Old Takeo began to feel uncomfortable as he recalled how they were apparently the equivalent of suicide missions.

"I later learned that my victories were... unwelcome. His betrayal was driven by petty jealousy. He knew I could endure anything, that I fear not even my own death!" Old Takeo said as he walked away.

"Punishment is one thing. This is... cruelty. Who could be so evil to desire another soul to endure such suffering? Who amongst us can be so dishonorable?!"

Old Takeo turned to his younger self. "Are you so blinded by your own loyalty? The orders... came from the Emperor himself!"

Old Takeo gasped and began to look at his hands in shock and horror.

"My life... my path... is built upon a lie... I... I need a moment... alone!"

As he left, Old Nikolai looked on with a bit of annoyance.

"I'd say something, but I'd probably get people pissed off at me."

"Yeah. You would." Old Dempsey replied.

"You may stop now, Monika. What happens here is no longer important." Young Takeo raised a hand.

"Good, because I am getting serious suicide vibes here right now." Monika stopped just after the memory of Old Takeo asking his younger self to be his kaishakunin.

"Wait, kaishakunin? That's the assistant for seppu... Takeo!" Yuri shouted as she rushed out of the room.

"Perhaps I should join her. We have much to handle now." Young Takeo got up and joined Yuri.

"Great! Looks like I'm the least fucked up of the group now." Old Dempsey groaned.

"Welcome to my life, buddy." Natuski spoke up.

"How the fuck did this happen?" Young Dempsey facepalmed.

"I don't know, but I know I don't like it." Old Richtofen facepalmed.

Yuri and Young Takeo came across Old Takeo holding one of Yuri's knives in his hand, seemingly ready to stab himself.

"You don't need to do this Takeo." Yuri tried to talk down the old warrior.

"Killing yourself would only just reset the cycle. You'd just begin events anew." Young Takeo reasoned.

Old Takeo gripped the knife tighter before tossing it to the ground.

"You're right. There is no point. Killing myself would only make it so that I'd have to go through life again, only with the knowledge that the one I follow... How?"

"Hmmm?"

"How did you move on? Why did you move on with your life, knowing that your life is a lie?"

"...Because even if we are not fighting for a master, we are still fighting for something greater. You are no warrior for the Emperor. You are ronin."

"...Ronin. Hmm. Perhaps you are right. I... may need some time to accept this however."

"Take all the time you need."

"I will. I apologize for my behavior earlier."

"I forgive you."

"Thank you, but you do need to loosen up. You are too tense. So serious. Your friends too."

Young Takeo blinked in surprise before recomposing himself.

"I will... keep this in mind."

"Alright. Let's get back to the classroom." Yuri spoke up.

"Will Monika give us back our weapons?"

"Duh!"

"Good. My ancestors would never let me hear the end of losing the Path of Sorrows."

"Agreed." Old Takeo said.

"Well, looks like this is goodbye for real." Monika spoke up.

Old Nikolai raised a bottle of vodka. "Finally. Sooner we finish great war crap, sooner we can go off and have adventures involving whatever the fuck Yggdamul... Yggdazil... Yggogah... Bah! World Tree wants us to do."

"Well, thank you for your assistance anyway." Young Nikolai interjected. "You tried your best Sayori. Is all I could ask for. Perhaps I should leave you with a gift for your help."

"But I didn't do anything big."

"You tried to. We must learn from our failures too. This Weiss woman should be of great help if we find her. Here. Should be good for when hellpigs find you and you cannot do anything else."

Young Nikolai handed Sayori Hellfire.

"Wait, you're giving me your version of your flamethrower? Why me?"

"Because inside you is fire that must be unleashed when motivated. Is only natural."

"Well, if we're giving weapons..." Young Dempsey handed Natsuki Overkill.

"Yeah. Handing me a minigun. That'll end well."

"Don't be a little shit, Natsuki."

Natsuki stuck out her tongue.

"Okay, this fires the gun. This works the grenade launcher."

"What about this red button?"

"Tactical Nuke."

"Wait what! A nuke! Are you insane?!"

"Well how else are you gonna power this damn thing without putting excess weight on it?"

"Anything but nuclear power that can explode!"

"Thank you! At least someone here listens to reason!" Young Richtofen interjected.

"Oh, don't get me started here." Dempsey pointed a finger at the German.

Old Richtofen rolled his eyes as he handed Monika the DG-5.

"I'll be sure to send you the blueprints next time we meet. I consider the DG-5 to be one of my greatest inventions, second only to the DG-2."

"Oh ja! The Wunderwaffe!" Young Richtofen interjected.

"I could go for wonderful waffles." Old Nikolai licked his lips.

"I'll figure out the best use for them." Monika said while getting a feel for the spikes.

"Slam by bending the knees, not the back. You do not want to throw it out."

Old Takeo looked over at Yuri and took out his katana.

"Everyone walks a path of sorrow, no matter what you may try to do. I know this better than anyone else here. The Path of Sorrows will be with me when we restart the Loop, but this blade will always be with you."

"Wait. Are you serious?"

"You have been a good companion for when we actually talked. So much horror that I never considered to be... good. It was refreshing."

"Th-thank you. I'm honored."

"As you should be. I am old man. My swordsmanship is less refined than my younger self. You have plenty of talent within you. Do not disappoint me. My honor's on the line with you, and I've found out some of your... lesser savory proclivities."

"L-let's not talk about that. At all."

Old Takeo laughed. "I'm just fucking with you. Go nuts. Anyway!" He turned to the others, "Shall we go?"

"Yes. Goodbye ladies! Be sure to tell hellpigs I said 'fuck you~' to them as they die!" Old Nikolai said as Young Richtofen opened a portal and the others left.

Soon, it was just the Literature Club, all alone.

Monika collapsed onto a chair.

"What a week!"

"Yeah!" Everyone groaned in unison as they too collapsed into chairs.

"Natsuki. This was very stressful, you know."

"If you're asking me to get the paddles, Yuri, I'm going to have to say that you better let me use the st-"

"Bedroom talk away from me, girls." Monika spoke up, "Seriously, I've had to deal with enough bull today as is, with the dead bodies and the hellish version of Alcatraz, and Becky eating said dead bodies."

"You're still hung up on that fact?" Sayori looked at Monika.

"Only when I witness it."

"...Fair!"

The four sighed as they waited for the Loop to end.

Compiler's Commentary: Two of the snips in this chapter (24.6 and 24.7) were written for April Fools' Day, 2019. See, over on SpaceBattles, it is traditional for us Writers of Infinite Loops to cut loose and write snips with no regards for the normal rules of the Infinite Loops Project. Most April Fools' Day snips are, naturally, non-canon as heck. Once in a while, we screw up and write something that can actually pass as a canon snip. It's tragic, yes, but what can you do?

24.1: …I get the feeling my girls have their work cut out for them, here.

24.2: So, yes, in case it had not been clear before now, Moniyori isn't happening in these Loops anytime soon. Please understand, this isn't because I disapprove of the ship. As I've often told my friends, I can go along with almost *any* pairing that's written well enough. But for Monika and Sayori the Loopers, I decided a sisterly relationship made more sense for them. That's all.

24.3: Monika, that means people *like* you. Or, at least, they like the thing you're in. That's a *good* thing, silly.

24.4: For anyone confused about Monika offering to "refund" someone for a *free* game, think of it this way. The reason Dan made DDLC free was because he didn't think it was fair to charge people for a game that actively deceives the player and tries to convince them it's something it isn't before pulling the rug out from under them. To say nothing of the fact that it mucks about with your computer files. Harmlessly, but still. So it stands to reason that in any Variant Loop where DDLC is actually a standard dating sim, it would have a price tag attached to it.

24.5: If you're one of those weirdoes who likes Peeps…well, I'm a weirdo for various other reasons, so I'm not going to judge you for it. I'm glad *some* people derive enjoyment from those marshmallowy bastards.

24.6: …that's a very cruel joke, Sayori, and not funny at all. But I'd probably do it too, so I forgive you.

24.7: For those of you who didn't get it: Wooky switched around Yuri and Natsuki's speaking patterns.

24.9: Have you ever heard "Breakdown" by Tantric? Pretty good early-00's rock song. Not sure why it popped into my head just now, but still. Good song.

24.10: I don't know about y'all, but I can't enjoy any kind of fake meat. Doesn't matter how "good" it tastes, I can still tell it's not *real* . It's like Uncanny Valley on my tastebuds.

24.11: Well, whattaya know! All's well that ends well, I suppose.

Into The Dark Side

Chapter 25 – Into the Dark Side

(Doki Doki Literature Club!)/(My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic)/(Star Wars)

(By me)

Part 1 – Decision

For all the absurdity that Loopers got up to, even the most innately outrageous of Loopers were known to sometimes enjoy more mundane activities. A sort of return to normal life, for whatever that Looper defined as normal. Which is why, despite being a Chaos Goddess and everything else, one could still find Pinkie Pie attending her everyday duties as an employee of Sugarcube Corner even when she was Awake.

She was in the back doing inventory when she heard the ring of the bell above the front door. She cheerfully bounced up to the counter, and greeted the young mare that had entered. Her coat was a lighter shade of pink than Pinkie's, her mane short, peach-colored, and decorated with a red bow, and her Cutie Mark was as sun partly covered by a raincloud.

"Heya Sunshower," said Pinkie, greeting Sayori by her Equestrian name. "How's it going?"

"Oh, you know. It's going," Sayori replied. She was smiling, and pretty convincingly too, as far as anypony off the street would be able to tell. But Pinkie thought she saw some brittleness there.

Without saying anything else, Pinkie held out a cookie. "Thanks," Sayori said quietly, accepting the cookie.

Then she almost choked on her first bite when Pinkie seemingly mitosis'd into two Pinkies right before her eyes. "Me-2, hold down the fort!" one of the Pinkies ordered the other. Then she turned back to Sayori, "Sunshower, let's you and me take a walk, okay?"

"Uh…yeah, okay," Sayori replied, following Pinkie out of the bakery.

Pinkie and Sayori strolled on through Ponyville. As far as Sayori could tell, it seemed like they were retreading the path they had taken the first time Pinkie had taken her aside for a talk.

Along the way, Pinkie spoke up, "Haven't seen much from you since we got back from Canterlot. Had a lot on your mind?"

"…yes," Sayori replied simply.

"Did the Changelings spook you?" Pinkie asked gently.

Sayori opened her mouth, but closed it, and then started again, "Yeah, a little bit, at one point. Then I remembered that there were a ton of Loopers around to handle things, so…it was fine, I guess."

"Ah," Pinkie said knowingly, "So something *did* bother you in Canterlot, just not the Changelings."

"I mean…no? Kind of? Maybe? I wouldn't say some *thing* bothered me," Sayori mumbled.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Pinkie guessed. "Had a head full of frownies weighing you down?"

Sayori stared at her. "I…I'm really not sure how comfortable I am, with you being so good at guessing stuff about me. It's…it's kind of creepy."

Pinkie gave a low chuckle, "Yeah, you're not the only one who finds my carefree approach to things off-putting."

"And that doesn't bother you?" Sayori asked frankly.

"Nah," said Pinkie, "It isn't my job to worry about how everypony feels about everything I do; my job is just to be the most Pinkie Pie that I can be!"

"But isn't part of that making others happy?" asked Sayori, "How can you make *everyone* happy if some people are put-off by you? And don't you mean 'to be the *best* Pinkie Pie' you can be?"

"I said *exactly* what I meant to say," said Pinkie with a giggle, "And I don't make people happy by making them happy to be around *me* . That's a very shallow kind of happiness for them, for one thing, and for another thing that would put a *huge* amount of pressure on me. Instead, I make people happy by doing things for them. Throwing parties, baking sweet treats, providing an outrageous and zany distraction from their mundane day-to-day glooms, transforming their lives through the Power of Friendship and the Rule of Funny, stuff like that."

"And that doesn't put a lot of pressure on you?" Sayori asked.

"I mean, it doesn't *not* put pressure on me, but it definitely doesn't put more pressure on me than I can handle. And when you've been Looping as long as I have, the concept of "limits" gets a lot murkier. Plus making people happy is what fulfills me, so it's super-duper worth it!"

"I see," said Sayori thoughtfully.

"So, what was it you came to talk to me about, anyways?" Pinkie asked as they passed the edge of town.

"Well…I made a decision," said Sayori, "And my answer is yes."

Pinkie stopped and blinked. "Really? You sure?" she asked.

Sayori nodded. "Yeah, I…we were at a *wedding* , Pinkie. A *royal* wedding. It should have been the most amazing, exciting thing that's ever happened to me! But instead I just…I felt lousy and like I was

bringing my friends down. I am so sick and *done* with being this way. If you think you can help me, whatever it is, I'll do it."

"I see…" said Pinkie contemplatively. "Well then, I need to talk to Twilight about what all goes into breaking in a new apprentice."

"Wait, what?" Sayori asked, looking alarmed.

"Just kidding!" said Pinkie with a snicker. "But really, if you want to train under me, I'll have to get some things ready for us."

"Eh? I thought you said I had to have a Star Wars Loop–"

"To start learning the Force stuff, yeah," said Pinkie, "But there's a whole philosophy that goes into it that I can teach you before that happens. I call it Pinkological Pielosophy!"

"…ooookay," said Sayori, squaring her shoulders. "Guess I can't say I didn't just ask for a bunch of wacky nonsense."

Pinkie suddenly whipped her head around and shot Sayori a more serious look than she ever would have imagined on the party pony's face. "First thing's first, little filly, let's get one thing straight. My goals and the means I employ to achieve them may look like wacky nonsense to everypony else, but to be my apprentice I have to teach you the *method* behind the madness. By the time we're done, you very well might become as incomprehensible to the masses as I am; but make no mistake, what I'm going to teach you is **Serious Business** ."

Sayori blinked, eyes as wide as saucers.

Then Pinkie's face broke out into a huge grin. "But don't worry, it's also going to be oddles of happyslappywackysuperfuntimes for all!"

"I…I'll do my best not to disappoint you, um, ma'am?" Sayori replied uncertainly.

"Oh, nononononono! I'm not one for formality, Sillyori; just 'Pinkie' will do, thanks. Now, meet me on the edge of the Everfree Forest bright and early tomorrow morning for your first lesson in Pinkosophical Piechology!"

"Don't you mean–okay, see you tomorrow Pinkie!" Sayori shouted after the older Looper, who was already a speeding speck in the distance. She turned away and headed back to Twilight's tree, where the Equestrian Anchor was hosting the Literature Club. And in spite of her uncertainty, she also felt strangely optimistic.

Part 2 – Sanctum

Day 1:

"Okie-dokie-lokie, Doki Doki," said Pinkie as she and Sayori started into the Everfree Forest. "So, not much point discussing the Force itself just yet, since ya can't use it. Instead, I'll tell you about the nature of the Dark Side, and why it's not as big and bad and spoopy as everypony thinks it is. Which is the whole reason I brought together the Looping Sith Ladies."

"Will this involve giggling at ghosties?" Sayori asked.

Pinkie chuckled, "If an opportunity arises, maybe. Not that you need it as long as you're with me, but just in case…ya got any self-defense skills?"

"Um…no, not really," said Sayori.

"Well, like I said; just stick close to me," Pinkie reiterated.

"So, remind me again, why are ponies spooked by this forest?" asked Sayori.

"Oh, you know, your usual fear of the unknown and mysterious," said Pinkie, "In most of Equestria, nature and stuff is managed by ponies. Teams of pegasi all over the land manage the weather, Princesses

Celestia and Luna make the sun and moon rise and set, we do things like the Winter Wrap-Up; y'know, I still remember how crazy it was when I first discovered that wrapping up winter *isn't* a thing in most of the multiverse."

"Oh, right, and Everfree does its own thing, exactly like nature does in most worlds," Sayori belatedly remembered. "So, in reality, it's no more dangerous than a normal Earth forest," she reasoned.

Pinkie Pie busted up laughing at that. "Yeah, sure, except last time I checked Earth's forests don't have manticores or cockatrices or any of the other nasty-ghastlies that roam the wilderness between pony settlements."

"Right. Forgot, not even this world is all sunshine and rainbows," Sayori sighed.

"Chin up, kiddo, you're in capable hooves," Pinkie reassured her, "Wacky and inexplicable as all get-out, I'll admit, but capable all the same. Anyone can act like a party maniac, but it takes a lot more than that to embody the Element of Laughter, and *way* more than *that* to become a Chaos Goddess."

Sayori gave Pinkie an odd look, and almost tripped over an errant root. "I'm sorry, a *what* goddess?"

"A Chaos Goddess," Pinkie repeated, "Didn't anypony tell ya?"

"No," said Sayori. "I'm guessing this is something that happened in a different Loop? Branch? Thingy?"

Pinkie nodded. "But we can get into that some other time. Today, we're focusing on the Dark Side, not the Immaterium."

"Right. And why are we venturing into this forest to do that?" Sayori inquired.

"The first step to understanding the Dark Side is to get in touch with *your* dark side, and come to terms with it," explained Pinkie. Her tone and manner were now rather serious. There was no hard edge or heavy weight in her voice, but the bubbly lightness of a few moments ago was gone. "I'm not going to lie to you, Sayori. This is going to be an ugly process. You're going to learn things about yourself that you won't like. Once you've accepted these things about yourself, it's up to you whether you share that knowledge with your friends, or keep it to yourself. Sharing won't necessarily make you any better of a person, and it won't be a *bad* thing if you keep your darker side a secret from others, either. The important thing is being honest to *yourself* , *about* yourself. But I figured you'd at least appreciate having the choice to keep what you learn about yourself between us. So we're heading someplace secluded, and I've told my friends to keep your friends away from us until we're done."

"I don't want to keep anything from my friends! Not Yuri and Natsuki, at least," Sayori said.

"You say that now, Sayori. And maybe you'll still feel that way when all is said and done. And good for you if you do, but at least this way you have a choice if you feel differently afterwards. Trust me on this one, please," said Pinkie, more somberly than Sayori had heard from her since her first day in Ponyville.

"Alright, Pinkie," Sayori reluctantly agreed.

"Great!" Pinkie chirped, flipping back to her usual high-energy state, "Glad we got that settled."

Sayori and Pinkie rambled along in silence for a short while, and then made unimportant smalltalk until they reached their destination.

"Oh, the castle place where you girls defeated Nightmare Moon," Sayori observed as they neared the gate to the Castle of the Two Sisters.

"Yepyep!" Pinkie blithely chirped as her mane twisted itself into an arm-like shape and pulled a caramel-coated apple out of her saddlebags, which she started munching on. "You got any sweet treats on ya, munch 'em down now," Pinkie advised, "You'll want your blood sugar up for this."

…

Sayori had tried meditating with Yuri before, and it wasn't something she would ever associate with a pony like Pinkie Pie. Yet, here they were. Pinkie's big talk about "confronting your inner darkness" had gotten Sayori more than a little nervous, if she was being honest. Pinkie's announcement that they would start with meditation had relieved her a bit, and then confused her a lot. Pinkie ignored her questions though, leading her to an overgrown courtyard near the middle of the castle.

"Breathe in, deeply but slowly," Pinkie instructed after they had sat down and gotten comfortable in the grass. "Hold it for a moment… now breathe out, *butnottoofast* ! Slowly. Evenly. Inhale…hold… exhale…got the rhythm? Now slower or faster, which ever feels more natural. Try to find a pace where you can feel your body more than you feel the air coming in and out of your mouth, if that makes sense? Focus on your lungs expanding and collapsing. Focus on your heart beating, your blood rushing through your legs and behind your ears. But try to ignore that itch in your flank, if ya can help it. No, no, that's fine, get the laughter out, don't stifle it. Laughing releases stress, and you want to be as relaxed as possible for this. ' *You cannot hold back a good laugh any more than you can the tide. Both are forces of nature.* ' Now, back to breathing. Inhale…hold… exhale…find the most natural feelings rhythm. Feel the sun on your skin, the breeze in your mane. Now, close your eyes…"

As Sayori did so, Pinkie lowered her voice. She spoke *just* loudly enough for Sayori, sitting less than two feet away, to clearly make out her words. "Imagine yourself as you really are. Imagine a mirror in front of you. Full-body. Imagine that it shows you who you really

are; your most honest reflection. Have you got it yet? Okay, now, describe your reflection to me, Sayori."

"Hmm. Average height for a young woman, I guess," Sayori started, matching Pinkie's low tone without thinking about it. "Peach-tone hair, like my mane. Short-cut. Light-blue eyes. Usually I wear a tee-shirt or a blouse with shorts when I'm not in my uniform…" she trailed off.

"Is that all?" Pinkie asked her softly.

"Uh…well, I…have a fair complexion, I guess? I'm not really Asian, or white either; my 'world' is odd like that. Mukokuseki and all that… but I definitely have light skin."

"Is that all?" Pinkie asked again.

Sayori kept describing herself in as much detail as she could, and every time she stopped Pinkie would only ask her "Is that all?" until finally Sayori replied, "Yeah, I guess."

Next, Pinkie told her to "Find your center. If we were Jedi, that'd mean clearing your mind of all feelings and distracting thoughts, opening yourself to the universe and becoming a selfless reflection yadda-yadda-yadda. We're going the opposite direction. I want you to find your *emotional* center. Your strongest feeling, the one that makes you feel the most alive. Not necessarily what makes you feel *best* , just what makes you feel the most *alive* . The feeling that most grounds you in the world around you. Opening yourself up to the universe will come later; for now, our focus is just on *you* . You don't have to describe anything to me this, time, just feel. I can sense your emotions anyways, so stuff would only get lost in translation if you tried."

So Sayori tried to focus on how she felt when she was having fun with her friends. Soaking up their positive vibes and giving them back. When Pinkie announced that meditation was over, Sayori had

opened her eyes and taken a deep breath, feeling better than she had all week.

Then Pinkie had sighed and said, "Hopefully you'll make better progress tomorrow," much to Sayori's bewilderment. Had restoring her positivity not been the goal? Pinkie refused to explain what she meant. "I'll never lie to your face, Sayori. The fatal flaw of most Sith is deceitfulness and mistrust. Traditionally, a Sith's journey almost invariably ends with either being discarded by their master when they aren't useful anymore, or with being betrayed and cast down by their own apprentice. Or, y'know, some other tyrant-slaying do-gooder. Point is, we're not going to be *that* kind of Master and Apprentice. We have to be honest with each other, and we have to trust each other. So I'll never tell you something that isn't true. And unlike some Jedi I could name, I'm never going to "from a certain point of view" you either. *Buuuuut* that doesn't mean I can always tell you the whole, unabridged truth about everything. Not when it comes to your training, anyways. The Path through the Dark Side has to be somewhat obscured. I know it doesn't make any sense yet, but when it comes to *this* Path you have to walk blindly through the fog to avoid certain pitfalls. My job is to guide you where the fog isn't too thick or too thin. If I *explain* the point of these exercises, you'll mess them up. Before anything else, this is a journey of self-realization. I can guide you, but I can't hold your hoof. Hand. Thing, y'know what I mean right? Anyways it's about time for lunch, c'mon."

…

After lunch, Pinkie had given Sayori a tour of the castle, and they had made smalltalk. Then, unexpectedly, Pinkie offered to teach Sayori how to bake.

"Um…eh-heh, I don't know about that…" Sayori said nervously. "Natsuki's tried…really, *really* hard, y'know, to help me out in the kitchen. It…it never ends well. Ever. Last time we were in a 'meatspace' loop, I set her house on fire."

"Aww. Oh well. Let's see…we need *some* kind of creative activity in our daily routine that you can use to express yourself," said Pinkie thoughtfully, "It's important to the process, y'know."

"Could we paint?" Sayori asked tentatively.

"YES!" Pinkie abruptly screamed, prompting Sayori to threw herself flat against the nearest wall. "It's brilliant, I love it!"

Pinkie grabbed Sayori with her tail and dragged yanked her into the nearest empty room, which she immediately began filling with art supplies from her Pocket. Next thing Sayori knew, Pinkie had plopped her on top of a cushioned stool in front of a canvas and easel, putting a paintbrush in one of her hooves and a palette on the other. And a beret on her head. "Now go nuts, kid!" Pinkie enthusiastically instructed, "Paint whatever you want, just make sure it comes from the heart. I've got an errand to run, I'll be right back. Don't worry, I'll leave some daemons around the edge of the castle grounds, so no beasties are gonna creep up and getcha!" said Pinkie before she zipped out of the room.

"Ooookay then…wait, daemons?!"

…

Having set up a defensive perimeter of Pastry-Daemons, Pinkie set out in search of the Everfree Forest's most exotic denizen.

"Knock, knock; what's up Doc?" Pinkie greeted as entered Zecora's hut.

"Pinkie Pie; good afternoon," replied Zecora, "To what do I owe your presence, this boon?"

"An apprentice in the Dark Side, I did recently enlist; and for her training, I need what's on this list," said Pinkie as she hoofed Zecora a piece of paper.

Zecora accepted the list and looked it over, already heading over to where she kept her herbs and fungi and such. As she read the list, her brow knitted and furrowed, and then her eyes widened as comprehension dawned on her. She turned back to Pinkie.

"Before you say anything," Pinkie raised a hoof in a 'hold on' gesture, "Yes, they're for our "guest" Sunshower. Yes, I know *exactly* how they'll affect her. And yes, I fully believe this will ultimately benefit her in a positive way…however unpleasant the short-term effects may be."

"And if, for making things worse, you find yourself guilty," Zecora spoke slowly, "Are you sure you can take that responsibility?"

Pinkie nodded, stone-faced. "I know what I'm doing, and you *know* me, Z. And like I told Twilight; I have good reasons for taking this on myself and not pointing her to Spike."

Zecora looked thoughtful, then she nodded and began gathering the ingredients Pinkie had requested.

…

"We're…sharing a room?" asked Sayori hesitantly..

Pinkie Pie paused in the middle of blowing up a balloon. "Well, we don't *have* to, but I figured it'd be more convenient for both of us. You mentioned you have pretty bad nightmares sometimes, right?"

"Yeah, but…I don't know, Pinkie, this seems…eh…"

"Sayori, just say what's on your mind, pretty-please-with-double-fudge-on-top? A timid Sith is just…kind of embarrassing, y'know?"

Sayori took a huge breath, and then blew it out just as hard. And she accidentally whinnied, causing her fall back and clap her forehooves over her muzzle, blushing furiously. Pinkie, to her credit, put up a heroic poker face while she tearfully laughed on the inside. Sayori

cleared her throat and said, "Alright. Putting it bluntly, Pinkie, this feels a *little* intrusive. I get that you probably have reasons for this, but whatever they are I'd feel more comfortable if you were across the hall, or even right next door. Just not in here, with me, when I'm sleeping. If that's alright."

Pinkie stared blankly at her for a moment, and then she smiled sunnily and said "Okie-dokie-lokie! See you in the morning, Sayori," as she Pepé Le Pew'd out of the room. Then she Pepé'd right back in and handed Sayori an un-inflated balloon. "Blow this up until it pops. Trust me," she instructed, still smiling, and then bounced out again.

Sayori blinked, and then looked at the balloon uncertainly. Then she shrugged and started blowing it up; much to her surprise, the balloon inflated *very* quickly, and in seconds it was twice as big as she was. When it popped, it sounded more like a large cartoon soap bubble than a balloon popping, and where the balloon had been there was now a four-poster bed with a queen-sized mattress, complete with a full-set of bedding.

Sayori stared at it incredulously. Then she shook her head and sighed as she crawled into bed. "I'm never going to get used to this Looping craziness," she said as she burrowed under the cover. "Or Pinkie," she added as she fluffed the pillow and laid her heavy head down upon it. Dinner had tasted wonderful, like everything she had tasted of Pinkie's cooking before. But now her stomach was churning uncomfortably, which she put down to anxiety. *'Natsuki and Yuri are alone with her right now,'* she thought, staring at a crack in one of the ancient stone walls of the long-neglected castle. *'I mean, they're not* alone *with her, but Twilight and everyone else…they don't know Monika like I do, even if they know what she's done. She's too damn easy to trust. And she's a pro at crying crocodile tears. At least in this world she doesn't have her powers.'*

' ***But are you any better?'*** a familiar non-voice intruded on her thoughts, ***'When you snapped even faster in her position? Admit***

it; our world and anything connected to it is cancerous. Even your precious friends.'

"Shut up," Sayori muttered wearily as she rolled over, turning her back to the crack in the wall and imagining that she was turning her back on the raincloud at the same time. "Get out of my head. Get out of my head. Get out of my head…" she murmured over and over again until she drifted off into a deep but restless sleep, and a surreal nightmare rife with hollow smiles, snakes made of rope, and cupcake-monsters.

In the room next door, Pinkie Pie spent the entire night meditating in a semi-conscious state, facing the wall behind which her new apprentice slumbered, and sharing her nightmare.

Part 3 – Crescendo

Day 2:

Sayori woke up, feeling less than awesome, and exited her room.

A cannoli with bat wings and three eyestalks flapped past her.

"…what?" she asked no one in particular.

Pinkie Pie came ambling down the hallway, flanked by two creatures; on the left, what appeared to be a cross between a muffin and a jellyfish floating through the air, and on the right a massive jelly donut with eight crab legs and a pair of crab pincers to match, with one massive eye perched in its center rolling back and forth and all-around. Pinkie was talking to them in some language that made Sayori's ears hurt, but by the tone she guessed she was giving orders? The Jellymuffin turned around and drifted back the other way, and the Donutcrab continued down the hall while Pinkie stopped next to Sayori and smiled at her. "Good morning, Apprentice~! Ready for a day of fun and learning?" Gummy the Alligator poked his head out of Pinkie's mane and poked his tongue out in greetings to Sayori, who giggled weakly.

"Yeah, sure thing Pinkie…but, uh, what are all these…things?"

"Well, yesterday I was thinking we could spend a little time each day after lunch fixing up the Castle while we're here, kind of a "wax on, wax off" sort of dealio, but this morning I decided that actually sounded boring. And not very useful since the training we're doing here is mostly psychological. But I also didn't feel like being in a musty rundown castle the whole time, and figured you wouldn't either, so I decided to make a batch of pastry-daemons to fix it up for us!"

"…pastry-daemons," Sayori echoed blanky.

"Yeppers! My personal breed of daemons; creatures of the Immaterium created by Chaos Gods from their own power," Pinkie replied. "I know they look odd, but they're all living extensions of my will, so you have no more reason to fear them than you have to fear me. They're totally harmless to people I like."

Sayori nodded, "Right."

After they had breakfast, Pinkie and Sayori went outside to meditate again. This time, Sayori spent a lot more time just practicing the breathing part. She had so totally zoned out that she was a little startled when Pinkie told her it was time to focus on her 'true reflection' again. It had occurred to Sayori that Pinkie hadn't just said 'imagine your reflection in a mirror', she had said 'imagine a mirror that shows your truest, most honest reflection, and describe it to me'. *'Since appearances can be deceiving, a "mirror that shows the truth" would reflect more than just what I look like, wouldn't it? That must be where I messed up yesterday,'* Sayori thought, even though Pinkie had never told her she had messed up the Reflection Exercise. So this time, Sayori fleshed out her self-description with things like "I see a girl who sleeps in a lot", "I see a girl likes to watch clouds", "I see a girl with a huge sweet tooth", and so on.

However, just like yesterday, Pinkie gave no reaction to anything Sayori said. She only asked "Is that all?" whenever Sayori stopped

talking, and when Sayori finally nodded silently, a little sullenly, in reply, Pinkie nodded back and said "Time to try and find your emotional center, again."

Once again, Sayori tried to recall her favorite memories of her friends. She tried to capture those happy moments and concentrate on them, like her precious bottles of light. After a while, her concentration was broken by Pinkie heaving a loud, drawn-out sigh. "We'll try again tomorrow. For now, we'll get some light exercise in before lunch."

"Thought you said we weren't going to do physical training?" asked Sayori, trying to tamp down her disappointment as she stood up and stretched her flanks.

"Our training isn't physical in nature, no, but a daily exercise routine is important to make sure you don't go from an Earth Pony to an Earth Pudgy," said Pinkie, snickering.

"Fair point," said Sayori, "so what are we–"

"TAG! You're it!" screamed Pinkie suddenly as she poked Sayori and then zipped away, leaving a Pinkie-shaped cloud of dust behind.

Sayori blinked twice before her brain caught up and she bolted after her teacher.

Day 3:

Sayori hadn't slept any better last night than she had the night before, and once again this morning Pinkie made it clear that she wasn't doing the 'Reflection' and 'Centering' exercises right. Well, she still wasn't giving any sign of disapproval about her 'Reflecting', but the fact that they were still doing it told Sayori she was screwing up, which didn't surprise her at all if she was being honest.

After the Morning Meditation, another game of tag that devolved into a round of laps around the castle, and lunch, Sayori headed to the

'Art Room'. Pinkie had placed a board on one of the walls, and she had hung Sayori's creations from the last two days on it. The first, a generic happy sunlit landscape. Next to it, sketches of the pastry-daemons Sayori had seen yesterday. Today, Sayori decided to challenge herself, and tried imagining a pastry-daemon she *hadn't* seen yet. She started with a pancake (she figured it was fair, since Pinkie's 'pastry-daemons' included muffins and cupcakes), and gave it a pair of eyestalks. Then. After a moments deliberation, she gave it a bunch of tentacles on its underside. After sketching it, she made another one with paints, and decided to use banana-cream yellow as the base.

When Pinkie came back to check up on her, having made it a habit to go and do something somewhere else while Sayori was in the Art Room, she gave the painting an approving nod and said, "Nice flumph!"

Sayori raised an eyebrow at her. "Sorry, nice *what* ?"

"Flumph! One of these guys," Pinkie said, pointing at the banana-cream-yellow-pancake-jellyfish-with-eyestalks.

"Oh…" said Sayori. "I was, eh, trying to make up a pastry-daemon… what's a flumph?"

"Well, see, there's this Branch, the kind that contains a multiverse of its own, and in the Hub its main back-up is a tabletop game known across Yggdrasil as ' *Dungeons & Dragons* '," Pinkie began.

"Oh, yeah, D&D. We play that sometimes," said Sayori.

"And you still don't know about flumphs?" asked Pinkie.

"Well…assuming that they're monsters (which is kind of sad because the more I look at this weird thing I made the cuter it seems) Monika's the only one who looks at the Monster Manual because she's our DM. Because *of course* she is," Sayori muttered under her breath.

"I see. I take it you've never had an adventure in the Underdark, then," Pinkie guessed, "Because that's where you find flumphs. No need to be sad about them though, they're *good* monsters. See, unlike most of the creepy, sneaky, no-good beasties and evil races that live in the Underdark, flumphs are innocent and peaceful. They feed off of the emotions of other creatures, but not in a harmful way. And they much prefer positive vibes over icky ones."

"Huh," said Sayori thoughtfully.

Day 4:

Another night, another nightmare.

Another morning, another meditation that helped her relax, followed immediately by the mental and emotional exercises that she was too stupid to get right, leaving her frustrated with herself and frustrated at Pinkie for refusing to give her so much as a *hint* about what she was doing wrong.

Today's game of tag turned into hide-and-seek in the forest. It didn't help Sayori's mood, any. She barely registered whatever she had for lunch with Pinkie, and then trudged off to the Art Room. If she had to guess, she'd say that Pinkie was using this part of the day to take a break from her. She wanted to be angry about that…but frankly, she couldn't bring herself to blame her. Sayori stared at the canvas for almost an hour, before she finally took some watercolors and painted a little garden. On the outer edges, blurry out-of-focus but vibrantly colored flower-like shapes, with an empty spot in the middle. Once the watercolors dried she picked up a piece of charcoal and, in that empty space, added a single, monochromatic, painstakingly-detailed flower, its head drooping as if it were a lily, a couple of shed petals drifting to the ground.

As with the past three days, after Pinkie returned from her 'Sayori Break', she tried to discuss what Sayori had made, but today Sayori just didn't feel like it. *'It's a flower, dying alone while life goes on*

around it, uninterrupted and undisturbed. What is there to explain, damn it?' she thought sullenly.

After that, as per their routine, Pinkie took Sayori to another room where they sat down and just talked about whatever. Sayori suspected these conversations were *intended* to substitute the therapy sessions she wasn't taking with Twilight anymore. Normally, Sayori actually enjoyed these conversations, because they weren't all about her; she had learned a lot about Pinkie, too. She had learned as much about the Party Pony in the last three days as she had since the loop had started. This evening, however, her reticence persisted, and she stubbornly resisted Pinkie's attempts to ply any chitchat out of her.

Much to Sayori's aggravation, Pinkie seemed to pay no mind to her gradually worsening mood. Instead, she seemed content to jabber on about some kind of nonsense that Sayori was only half paying attention to. Something about 'darkness' and 'silence'…

After that, it was time for dinner, which Sayori begrudgingly forced herself to eat, and then she went to bed early. As with the last three nights she slept deeply, but restlessly, with nightmares about mocking mirrors, a rotting garden, and a deafening silence that made Sayori wish she could scream at the top of her lungs.

But no sound would come.

Day 5:

"Is that all?" Pinkie asked again.

"Yeah, that's all," Sayori replied, trying hard not to give away how defeated she felt.

"Alright then. Try assuming your human form."

"Wait, what?" Sayori asked, opening her eyes in surprise. Then her jaw dropped.

Sitting across from her was not a pink pony, but a pink *human* . Young adult, by appearances, with long, curly, bushy magenta hair and Pinkie's blue eyes, garbed in a tie-dye robe. "I said, try assuming your human form," the woman repeated in Pinkie's voice, "Hold that self-image you've been building up all week in your head, and try to *become* it."

"But…Pinkie, I don't have any shapeshifting ability," Sayori protested meekly, irrationally disappointed in herself for not having a power that she suspected, based on Pinkie's request, almost all Loopers had.

On her end, however, Pinkie's cheeks puffed as she held back a giggle. "Sayori, even if you can't shapeshit at will, all freestyle-like, any Looper with access to their Pocket can shift between forms from previous Loops if they bothered to make an imprint of it on their soul. Usually, this means making an effort to commit your form to heart *during* that loop, if you want to use it again later. That's how Loopers can keep physical stuff like Saiyan biology between loops. But even if you don't do that, any form that you've spent enough loops as, like your *true* form, should be imprinted by default."

"…my true form is a data file though…" Sayori murmured.

A tiny, high-pitched squeak of laughter slipped out before Pinkie reasserted her composure. "Just…just try it, please?" she asked.

"Okay…" Sayori said doubtfully. She closed her eyes, her carefully-crafted self-image instantly springing back into her mind's eye. *'Alright…time to, eh, "be myself", I guess?'* she thought to herself uncertainly. Nothing happened at first…

Then Sayori's eyes snapped open as she fell backwards in shock. She blinked rapidly as she raised her *hands* to look at them, even though she could plainly *feel* her now-human form. Then she unleashed a high-pitched squeal of laughter as she wiggled her fingers. "I did it! I did something *right* !"

"Alright, alright," Pinkie giggled, "As much as it leaves a funny taste in my mouth to say this; calm down and focus, kid. Meditation time isn't over yet."

"You don't understand, Pinkie. FINGERS! It's been over a year since I've had *fingers* !" Sayori said, staring at her with wide eyes.

"And you can freak out about having your fingers back later, on your own time," Pinkie asserted, "Right now it's still training time."

Sayori groaned, but she lurched back up to an upright sitting position, crossed her legs, folded her hands in her lap, closed her eyes, took in a big breath through her mouth, and blew it out through her nose. "Alright. Emotional center?" Sayori asked.

"Emotional center," Pinkie confirmed.

…

Pinkie never told Sayori to return to her pony form, so for her daily art she decided to do some fingerpainting.

When Pinkie returned, she too was still in her human form. "No feelsies-talk today, Sunshower. We're going to start a new exercise, in the courtyard."

Obediently, Sayori followed Pinkie through the castle's halls and back out into the courtyard where they meditated in the morning. The sun was setting, the wind was mild, and if one focused their hearing they could *just* make out the dulcet tones of Steve Magnet singing somewhere in the distance.

Pinkie shrugged off her tie-dye robe, revealing a magenta-colored sleeveless gi underneath. Pinkie whirled around to face Sayori, two three-foot wooden rods appearing in her hands. Pinkie gently underhanded one of them to Sayori.

Naturally, Sayori yelped and jumped backwards, letting the rod hit the ground before rushing over to pick it up, gingerly, by the hilt. She was blushing furiously. Upon closer inspection, she realized that the rod was indeed divided into distinct 'hilt' and 'blade' segments, though the 'blade' part was blunted all-around. Surprisingly, most of the weapon's weight was in the hilt.

"Um…what are these?" asked Sayori.

"Training sabers," replied Pinkie, "We're going to begin combat training, for a couple of reasons. First, you're getting frustrated with the training, and since giving you the answers isn't an option–partly because there *isn't* a right or wrong answer to give–you need a more direct physical outlet for those frustrations. Second, strange as this may sound coming from the party pony that lives in a world where friendship is literally magic, but there are times and places in the multiverse when violence is unavoidable. Inescapable, even. Self-defense is important."

"…I mean, yeah, I guess you're right. I kind of know how to fight with a yoyo," said Sayori.

"Hmm. Interesting," said Pinkie with an expression Sayori couldn't read. "Anyways, if you're gonna be a Sith, you're gonna learn to use a lightsaber someloop, so getting some practice in with a training saber is a good idea, which is the third thing."

Sayori took a deep breath, slowly, and raised the saber in an imitation of a ready stance she often saw Yuri used whenever she practiced in the clubroom. "Alright, let's do it," she said resolutely.

Pinkie smiled, casually walked right up to her with no guard to speak of, and smacked the training saber cleanly out of Sayori's hands with a one-handed swing. It had already happened by the time her brain had processed the fact that Pinkie's arm had moved.

And now her wrists stung from the shock of having the weapon wrenched out of her grasp.

"Oww…" she whined.

Pinkie twitched a finger of her off-hand, and Sayori's saber drifted back towards her. "Don't sweat it, kid," Pinkie said kindly, "The first thing anyone has to learn about using any weapon is how to hold it."

Pinkie coached Sayori on how to properly grasp the saber, repeatedly cautioning her to *never* let her hand slip above the hilt's guard. "No reason not to get into good habits early," Pinkie said as she backed off a few feet and raised her own saber.

This time, Pinkie sprang forward and swung at her with a huge grin. Sayori managed to catch Pinkie's saber with her own and block it… but she immediately fell backwards as Pinkie shoved her over.

"…next thing to learn is stance," Pinkie snickered.

Sayori huffed, and got back up. Pinkie rushed her again, and this time Sayori skipped to the side; Pinkie swung wide but hit nothing but air. Sayori giggled rolled forward, swinging at Pinkie's legs, but Pinkie hopped over and swung down, smacking Sayori across the back.

Pinkie backed off and Sayori got back up, wincing. "To crib a line from a gazillion cheerleaders: Be Aggressive!" Pinkie shouted at her, still smiling genially.

' *Aggression…right, Pinkie and I are cut from the same cloth when it comes to dealing with people. If she can muster the nerve to whack someone with a stick, so can I,'* Sayori thought. It was probably just her imagination, but it felt like the colors around her dulled as she mentally stepped away from her almost ever-present mask. She stopped smiling, stopped *concentrating* on keeping up her fake smile, and concentrated instead on her breathing. She lowered her eyes from Pinkie's face to her center of mass. Then she charged at her, yelling without thinking about it, swinging as hard as she could in a diagonal line across Pinkie's chest.

But Pinkie wasn't there anymore; Sayori felt something hit the back of her leg. Felt her legs knocked out from under her so hard that her whole body flipped backwards, and her head slammed into the ground…

…

Sayori, battered and weary, flopped onto her bed. Pinkie followed her in, and sat down.

Sayori groaned, "What do you want *now* ? I thought we were done for the day." A small part of her mind winced at how rude she was being; the rest of her mind was too bruised to care.

"Almost," Pinkie replied, unfazed as ever by Sayori's daily-worsening grouchiness. "One more exercise to add to the daily regimen; this will be the last thing we add for a good while, until you're ready for the next phase of training."

"…fine, let's get this over with. *Quickly* . I want to stop being conscious," Sayori grumbled as she rolled up to a sitting position. Pinkie was in her pony form again, but Sayori had no intention of changing back unless she was ordered to; and even then, she felt like she would probably bitch and complain about it.

Pinkie was sitting with her hindlegs crossed, and in a less foul mood Sayori would have once again marveled at the unusual flexibility of Equestrian ponies. Rolling her eyes, Sayori assumed the meditative position. "Meditating *before* bed, now, I take it?" she asked, a bit sharply.

"Yepyep!" Pinkie chirped. "Pretty basic stuff; clear your mind of annoying clutter and noisy thoughts, and then go over everything that happened today. Normally, meditating on the day's events like this involves distancing yourself, remembering as if it had all happened to someone else and your just watching. That's how the Jedi would do it, for example."

"But Sith meditation is different, right?" Sayori asked. Her tone was much more even now. Without really thinking about it, she had fallen into the familiar breathing pattern.

"Uh-huh," Pinkie confirmed, "Normal meditation, both for Jedi and most of the rest of the multiverse, helps you concentrate by clearing your mind of all distractions, and by calming your emotions. Relaxing and de-stressing yourself, basically. But while calmness and clarity can be helpful to anyone, for a Sith a *relaxed* mind is a handicap. The goal of your nightly meditations will be to *maintain* your tension. It can be good *or* bad; anything that got you really excited *or* mad as heck. Either way, comb through your memories of the day, and hold onto the memories that provoke the strongest emotional reactions in you. You might find that something you didn't react to very strongly or think much about at all when it happened hits you harder when you revisit it in this way. Gather all of these powerful emotions–and, just as importantly, the memories attached to them–and focus all your energy on them."

"Don't have much energy left to spare, Pinkie," Sayori mumbled. Her head was getting heavier and heavier as she combed through her memories of the day. She most vividly recalled her excitement at seeing her own hands again after so long, watching her fingers wiggle in the morning sunlight…

… *filtering in through the half-closed blinds of her bedroom window, feeling her fingers claw helplessly at the rope around her neck, too tight, can't breathe, head's too heavy, head's too light, GoddamnitI'msostupidMonikahowcouldyou–*

Sayori screamed so shrilly that she felt a stabbing pain in her own ears. She opened her eyes and saw Pinkie staring calmly back at her. "Memories, and emotions," Pinkie said slowly, calmly, in a tone that somehow relaxed Sayori's frazzled nerves, just a little, "Are tightly tangled up in each other. Memories connect to other memories not just by cause and effect, through the natural progression of events, but to other memories that share the same

emotion." She said nothing else. Just stared at her, waiting for a response.

Sayori forced her frantic breathing and heartbeat to even out. "I…I remembered my death. Th-the noose…"

Pinkie nodded.

"B-but, the last thing was thinking was…my hands. Fingers. Why…?" Sayori asked helplessly, not able to put the thought into words.

Pinkie opened her mouth. But then closed it. "Are you sure? I can *tell* you why, but are you *sure* you want to know?"

Sayori hesitated, but she nodded weakly.

"Relief," Pinkie said, almost sadly. "You jumped from a happy memory to a terrifying one…but the emotion that threaded them together was relief, Sayori."

Sayori paled. "I…I don't understand…"

"Can't really say I do, either, kid," Pinkie said frankly as she got off of the bed. "But you're the only one who can figure it out. Good night, my Apprentice," said Pinkie as she left the room.

…

Pinkie's room was right next to Sayori's, but the short walk from Sayori's bed to her own felt like a thousand-mile uphill trek. Every instinct in Pinkie's soul, every fiber of her being, screamed for to go back and do *anything* she could to comfort the wounded child. A hundred-times more so because she herself was complicit in Sayori's current suffering.

' *But the Way of the Sith isn't a peaceful one. I knew this going in and I did everything I could to make her understand that…or maybe not. I could have tried harder, but I* wanted *her to say yes. I'm the only pony who can help her like this, and this will make her stronger*

than anything else could. Inside and out. When it's over, I'll make it all up to her. But for now, I have to stay strong. For both of us. The Way of the Sith brings suffering to the Master as well as the Apprentice, it seems.'

For the first time in a long time, as Pinkie climbed into her bed, she remembered her own training, and her Master, many, many loops ago.

She repressed a horrified shudder, and tried to think happy thoughts, just like the girl crying in the next room.

Part 4 – Routine

Day 53:

Sayori felt like a robot.

After weeks of horrific nightmares, and with her mood darkening with every passing day, at this point she was just going through the motions.

She woke up against her will, Pinkie all but dragging her out of bed, and she apathetically forced down some breakfast.

She meditated with Pinkie, but she couldn't muster any happy memories anymore. Only darker memories; of fear, of sorrow, of anger, and of general apathy would come into focus.

Pinkie would force her to run laps around the castle, to climb up a tree, or some other inane physical activity that she had to practically be dragged through. She would force lunch down her throat, and then sit alone in the Art Room for an hour or two while Pinkie did whatever somewhere else. For several weeks, Sayori hadn't made anything new.

When Pinkie got back to the castle, they'd take on their human forms and spar in the courtyard. Only for this activity did any semblance of

vitality return to Sayori. She *almost* enjoyed herself, briefly escaping her sense of pointlessness and lethargy by throwing her entire being into a single purpose; beat the shit out of the obnoxiously cheerful person who *claimed* she was trying to help. Pinkie trounced her every time, of course, but even though she was a far, far older Looper Sayori could plainly see that physical combat wasn't anywhere near to being a strong suit of Pinkie's. As long as Pinkie kept to her promise that she wouldn't use any kind of powers in their spars, Sayori reckoned she might be able to beat her, if they kept practicing like this for the rest of the loop. This one thing, this one somewhat practical goal was enough to give Sayori a sense of purpose, if only for an hour or two each afternoon.

After sparring, Sayori would force dinner down her throat, and before going to bed she would meditate on all the restless frustration, apathy, resentment that her friends and Monika were probably having loads of fun with the other Loopers while she languished in Pinkie's "care", and general dejected bitterness that she felt throughout the day, as well as the savage joy that came with sparring. It'd been a week, at least, since Sayori had felt anything she would call "positive", but the adrenaline of combat, the grim satisfaction of getting a lucky hit in and seeing Pinkie's skin bruise, and even the pain of getting hit herself felt much better than the emptiness in which she drifted through the rest of the day.

Finally, she'd go to sleep, fitfully, telling herself that in the morning she would tell Pinkie she'd had enough and wanted to go back to Ponyville. And then the nightmares would come. And come the morning, she'd say nothing to Pinkie and carry on with the routine.

Because at least while she was suffering here, her friends could enjoy themselves without worrying about her. Out of sight, out of mind, right?

Thus, despite having lost faith in Pinkie's "training", Sayori continued to trudge through each day. By enduring as she was, Natsuki and Yuri could get the most out of a loop in Equestria. When the loop ended in a couple years, they could tell her all about it in the

clubroom, and she'd put on her brave face and pretend she was happy for them. She'd never betray to them how miserable she had been, because it would sully their own happy memories. Sayori would never do that, because she was determined to be as unselfish as she possibly could. Because Monika was, in her mind, the epitome of selfishness, and there was nothing and no one that Sayori hated as much as she hated Monika, because it was Monika's fault that she was the way she was. It was Monika's fault her head was so much more fucked up than it was ever supposed to be, and it was Monika's fault her suffering was prolonged by the Loops, because Monika was the Anchor and as Sayori understood it she was Looping so she could keep Monika company.

Her life was the cruelest, sickest joke in the entire multiverse, Sayori reckoned, and it was all Monika's fault. And because Monika couldn't suffer alone, Sayori was stuck with her, and even if she killed herself a hundred-thousand times the joke would never end. And it would never stop moving, either.

At some point, Sayori hit a sort of "terminal limit" of angst, and stopped caring that she was miserable. She just toiled through the days, because it was her fate to suffer and nothing she could do would stop it.

Tonight, the nightmare was an oddly mild one. Sayori was just wandering alone in a desert, under a full moon. The air wasn't as frigid as it should have been.

Sayori trudged along across the dunes, having nothing else to do, until she came to a small table with a tea set. Seated at the table was a tall woman with dark blue skin, a spiraling horn on her forehead and a pair of feathery wings on her back, garbed in a star-studded dress.

"Good evening…Sunshower, wasn't it?" Princess Luna greeted her.

"Sayori," said Sayori tonelessly. She pulled out the only other chair and sat down, as she was clearly meant to. "Not that it matters what

you call me, I guess. Am I just dreaming about you, or are you actually here? Isn't there anypony else who needs you to save them from nightmares tonight?"

"Pinkie Pie asked me to stay out of your nightmares, for the duration of your tutelage under her," Luna said.

"Right. Of course she did," said Sayori, her tone unfazed. In truth, the revelation cut her deeply; even if her methods were going nowhere, Sayori had honestly believed Pinkie meant well.

"But even if it's just for this Loop," Luna continued, "you are one of our subjects, so I have kept an eye on your nightmares from a distance. Pinkie has not rescinded her request for me to abstain from interfering, but with my own judgment I have decided that you are unlikely to make any progress if events proceed at this pace. Thus, I am intervening. May I count on your discretion in this matter, Sayori?"

Sayori blinked, uncomprehending. Then, "What? Do you mean…"

"May I ask for your promise not to inform Pinkie Pie of my involvement," Luna restated herself patiently.

Sayori shrugged. "Sure. I can keep my mouth shut. So how do you plan on 'intervening'? Gonna explain to me what the hell Pinkie expects from me?"

"No. Unfortunately, I cannot do that," said Luna sadly, "Truthfully, in no small part because I myself know not the designs by which Pinkie is acting. Only that she fully expects this experience will ultimately bring you great happiness. And in matters of the happiness of others, the Element of Laughter can be relied upon to know her business. However, everypony's unhappiness is unique to them, and what Pinkie is presently attempting with you is something she has never attempted before. Thus, a lack of experience works against her and I fear she has made a misstep. I owe the ponies who presently bear the Elements of Harmony a debt that, by my own reckoning, can

never fully be repaid. Thus, I shall do my utmost to correct the situation."

"Okay…but how?" asked Sayori.

"As I said, Pinkie can generally be relied upon to know her business, as the Element of Laughter. Not to lay blame, but I suspect that the reason your progress with her has stalled is because you do not trust her. Perhaps not to the extent of actively *mistrusting* her, but at the very least you do not have faith that Pinkie's endeavors will bear fruit. Your lack of faith is sabotaging the both of you. The best that I can do, as I see it, is to get you to trust Pinkie Pie."

Sayori groaned, "Okay, but *how* ?"

This time, Luna said nothing. Instead, she picked up the teapot, withdrew a long, thin wand from within her robe, and waved it over the table. It became a pedestal. Luna waved the wand again, and an empty stone basin appeared atop the pedestal. "Sayori, do you know what a Pensieve is?" Luna asked.

"Eh…you sure you don't mean 'pensive'?" Sayori asked.

"I assure you, young one, I said precisely what I meant to say," Luna said kindly. She tilted the teapot, and Sayori's eyes widened as she watched a strange, silvery-clear, gaseous-liquid substance pout out into the basin. "It is said that one must walk a thousand miles in another's shoes, to understand them but a little," explained Luna as the teapot disappeared in the folds of her dress. She gently prodded the strange substance with her wand, and set it to swirling around in the basin. "A quaint proverb, to be certain, but hardly practical in literal application. But to see one's memories…there lies a surer way to attain insight into the makings of a person."

Sayori blinked again. "You mean…memories? This stuff is… memories? Pinkie's memories?"

Luna nodded. "Yes and no. These memories are not precisely Pinkie's own. Even if I had her memories in my keeping, I would not presume to show them to another without her explicit permission. One's *own* memories are terribly intimate, after all. Strictly speaking, these memories are my own. But they are my memories of Pinkie's nightmares. I realize that may seem like blatant loophole exploitation, but to me it makes a world of difference. And, in truth, I am still not completely at ease with showing you this. But as I said before, my debt to Pinkie and her friends is an immeasurable one. If this ethically questionable act will help further Pinkie's goals and bring happiness for both you and her, then I cannot let my own scruples bar me from taking this course of action."

"But…why?" asked Sayori, eyeing the basin and its contents warily.

"I don't doubt that Pinkie has already tried to impress upon you the notion that you two are kindred spirits. That she understands your pain, and can thus be trusted on her word that her efforts will benefit you. I believe your lack of faith in her must be born of your inability to reconcile the Pinkie you have seen with your own self-image, skewed as it is by your own depression. It is my hope that by experiencing Pinkie's nightmares first hand, you will understand that her empathy for you is well-founded, and that you may then find it in yourself to put your faith in her. One can, after all, only learn so much from a Master that they do not fully embrace."

Sayori's eyes shifted from the Pensieve to Luna's face, and back again. "…alright. What do I do?" she asked at length.

…

Day 54:

Pinkie awoke shortly before dawn, as usual. She opened her door, and was struck dumb at the sight of Sayori standing right outside. Her mane and tail were both freshly brushed and very slightly damp-looking, and her eyes were brighter and clearer than they'd looked

for weeks. "Good morning, Master Pinkie!" Sayori beamed at her, "Ready for breakfast?"

Pinkie blinked. Twice. Then she sniffed the air, and realized she smelled food. "Um…did…you cook?" she asked.

"Ehehehe…kinda? I started to, but before I could do too much damage some of the pastry-daemons shoo'd me out of the kitchen and took over."

"I see," said Pinkie. Then she smiled. "Well, if you're ready and raring to go, then let's go!"

"Aye, aye, Master Pinkie," Sayori said with a nod, falling into step behind her.

"You, uh, don't *have* to call me 'master', y'know."

"Gotcha, Master Pinkie," Sayori replied.

"Ah, so that's how we're playing this," Pinkie said with a sly grin, "Alright, fair enough."

Sayori still felt drained and hollow inside, but she was determined to keep up her brave face. She wouldn't let Pinkie's efforts on her be a waste.

…

Meditation time.

"Clear out all the distracting brain-noise, and focus on the emotion that most grounds you in your day-to-day life. Find your emotional center," Pinkie instructed.

' *It's not happiness,'* Sayori thought, *'As much as I hate to admit it, I'm not a very happy person…'*

So, reluctantly, she turned her mind to less pleasant feelings.

She thought of fear, and immediately Monika's face flashed into her mind.

She thought of sadness, and immediately Monika's face flashed into her mind.

She thought of anger, and immediately Monika's face flashed into her mind.

Sayori felt her heart sink as a long overdue realization swept through her. *'Monika…'*

"It's Monika," she said out loud, her tone brittle. "My emotional center is Monika. She scares me, Pinkie. My day-to-day life is a nightmare because of her. Because I'm stuck with her. Because I have to *amuse* her to keep my friends safe from her." Sayori's voice cracked a little, and she left hot, salty moisture pricking her eyes.

And she also heard Pinkie give a sigh. "Progress," she heard the older pony mutter. More loudly, she said, "Emotions can *feel* good or bad, Sayori, but regardless of how they feel emotions are a form of energy. Positive or negative, you can still draw strength from them."

"But…but I don't *want* to draw strength from fear, or from anger…"

"The source of your strength isn't as important as how you choose to apply your strength."

"But it hurts," Sayori whimpered, drawing in on herself.

"There's no way to escape pain. It's part of livin'. Best ya can do is make sure your pain isn't for nothing."

"How?" Sayori asked.

"That's on you, kid. When I hurt, it reminds me why it feels so nice to help others forget their worries," said Pinkie with a shrug.

Sayori grew thoughtful at that. "Resolve from pain," she murmured.

"You're afraid of Monika," Pinkie said. "But you can't get away from her, so your fear burns into anger, and from anger into *hatred* ."

After a long silence, Sayori bowed her head and said, "You're right. I…I hate her. God, that feels so ugly…"

"But it's not like your hate is unfounded," Pinkie observed. "She caused you a lot of pain and grief. Hating her isn't your problem; being *conflicted* about hating her is what's messing you up inside."

Sayori looked up and tilted her head. "You…wait, you *don't* think I'm wrong to hate her?"

Pinkie gave her a flat look and deadpanned at her, "We ain't the Bureau, Sayori, we don't shove our friendship magic down everypony's throats, despite what our reputation would have many believe. Hating people for petty stuff is bad, yeah, but what Monika's done to you is hardly 'petty'. And her being your Anchor and you being her Looper doesn't mean you're obligated to be her friend. It's commendable that she *tries* to atone for what she did, but that doesn't mean you *have* to forgive her. No one can force that out of you. *No one* has any right to dictate how *you* feel about the people who have wronged you. In cases like this, where *actual* serious harm has been done, you're justified to hate her."

"But…but I still shouldn't, right? I mean…I mean…" Sayori trailed off, at a loss for words.

"What? What reasoning could possibly be more meaningful than how you feel about what's been done to you?" Pinkie challenged. "All those pretty ideas about forgiving and forgetting are nice and all, but none of it *has* to sway you. Hating someone for hurting you and your loved ones *isn't* wrong, Sayori. It doesn't make you a bad person. Some people might sympathize with Monika's place in all this and argue that it's mean of you to hold this over her head, but they wouldn't have any right to judge you for it. Whatever you feel about Monika, it's your place and your place alone."

"…you, Pinkie Pie, a Looper from Equestria where friendship is literally magic, *The Element of Laughter herself* , are telling me it would be okay for me to *hate* someone?" Sayori asked.

"As much as you want," Pinkie replied. "I mean, it'd be bad for you to let it consume you as a person, since that's a way people can wind up turning evil, but yeah. To hate or to forgive is *your* choice, and *if* it's wrong to hate, it's *more* wrong to deprive you of that choice."

"I…huh. Hating Monika is actually an option I have," Sayori repeated, still seeming to struggle with the concept.

"Like I said, the thing that's messing you up is your internal conflict over whether to hate her or forgive her," Pinkie restated, "Sometimes taking the middle path between two extremes just tears you apart."

"So you're saying it doesn't *matter* which one I pick, so long as I pick *one* of the two and move on with my life?"

"NO!" Pinkie yelled, tugging on her mane, "It *absolutely* matters which one you pick! But it should only matter to you; don't let anyone but you influence which one you choose."

"I mean, I'm pretty sure it'll matter to Monika–"

"Yeah but you need to make your choice for *you* , not for *her* . She doesn't have a say in this, and neither does anyone who isn't you."

"…I'm guessing that asking for advice would be poorly received, here?" Sayori asked.

Pinkie stared at her flatly, one of her eyes twitching slightly. "Yes. Yes it would. Like I said before, I'm here to guide you down the road of self-discovery; not my place to tell you which path to take, just see which one you choose."

"Right," Sayori said, staring off to the side.

"Yeah…tell you what, why don't you just take the rest of the morning to process this, okay?" Pinkie suggested. "We can talk about it more after lunch, if you want. Or after sparring. Or tomorrow. Whenever you're ready."

"Yeah. Thanks," Sayori replied absently, laying down on her back and staring up at the clouds.

…

Day 62:

After the daily round of sparring, Sayori slumped back against a tree, shifting back into her pony form. Pinkie sat down next to her, still human, and took a long swig from a water bottle.

Sayori suddenly spoke up, "So…what if I decide I can't forgive Monika?"

"Hmm?" Pinkie turned to look at her, blinking.

"I mean…under more normal circumstances, I'd sarcastically say 'have a nice life' and never see her again. But as Loopers that's… kind of…not possible. When this loop ends, we're probably going to be back in our game. And, like, ninety-nine out of a hundred loops or something like that, we're in our game. Sometimes Yuri or Natsuki or both of them aren't Awake, but almost every time I'm Awake, so is Monika. And those are the *good* loops. As much as Monika disgusts me," Sayori actually blushed a little at her own caustic candor, "I'd rather not deal with her when she's Unawake. Because then I *have* to let her know that, y'know, *I* know. You know, about the game and all. Er–"

"No, no, you're fine," Pinkie said quickly, "I'm following you perfectly. I do this gag on people all the time; on purpose more often than you might think."

"Right. Perks of talking to a walking Loony Toons shout-out, I guess," Sayori quipped, earning a snicker from Pinkie. "But anyways, yeah. The *easiest* way to keep Unawake-ika from doing anything bad is to spill the beans to her. I don't even have to explain the loops, I just have to tell her that I know we're in a game."

"And then all she wants to do is hang out with you, because you're 'real' like she is, and it's awkward because you still feel uncomfortable around her and she doesn't know why, and telling her why you're uncomfortable would just make it more awkward, because then you *do* have to explain the loops and she has to process *all* of that. Right?" Pinkie surmised, all in one breath as was her habit.

Sayori looked away from Pinkie. "Honestly? That's the *best* -case scenario."

"Ah. Let me guess; sometimes she freaks out and thinks being 'real' just makes you a more dangerous rival for the player's affections–"

"Nope," Sayori interrupted. "I mean, yes, that does happen sometimes, but that's not the worst that can happen. I can control the game too, since I take over as club president at the end of Baseline. And being a Looper, I can out-hax Monika when she's not Awake, no problem. She's…really not that good at it, honestly. On one hand, that's way simpler for me than just having to be buddies with her, but it's more stressful because I have to keep her contained until she Wakes Up. And when she does Wake Up, she's all horrified and junk, and that just adds to the awkwardness because then I feel like I have to *reassure* her that her own craziness is somehow not her fault."

"So…dare I ask, what *is* the worst-case scenario?"

"…she becomes obsessed with *me* instead of the Player, because I'm just as real and a lot more accessible."

"…oh," said Pinkie, her hair flattening from how discomforting that mental image was.

"And there's no silver lining to having a *yandere* obsessed with you," Sayori grumbled. "At least when she's Awake, Monika has the decency to give me space on the days I tell her I want to be left alone."

"So," Pinkie started after a moment of silently processing the implications, "What *if* you can't forgive Monika?"

"Yeah. Like…what then? Either I still go on pretending to be alright with her to keep things copacetic in the club, which sounds like an even worse nightmare, or I bare my true feelings and burn that bridge between us forever…and then what? I'm still kind of stuck with Monika in our home-loop."

"You *could* appeal to the Admins to be a Travelling Looper," Pinkie suggested.

"Like Ms. Everywhere?" asked Sayori. For a moment, the *possibilities* of being a truly free and untethered Looper loose in the Multiverse presented themselves to her. Jenny had spoken to them of how much she enjoyed being on what amounted to the ultimate road trip, never knowing where she would end up next and making friends by the thousands all across Yggdrasil.

Then she thought of Yuri, and Natsuki, and *him* , and how she'd probably only see them for a couple Loops out of every million or so. "Nope," Sayori said reflexively, the instant *that* thought darted across her cerebellum. "Quitting Monika is one thing, but if it means quitting the others…not just hardly ever seeing them again, but leaving them with *her* …nope, can't do it, not me."

"You have to decide what's best for you, not–"

"Trust me, Pinkie," Sayori said seriously, looking her dead in the eyes, "I would never forgive myself for doing that. I don't *want* to be

the kind of person who could do that without regretting it."

"Fair enough!" Pinkie chirped brightly. "Stay true to yourself, always, no matter what. That's how you avoid falling into the Dark."

"So…any other alternatives?" asked Sayori.

"Mmmm…well, you could try to get Monika made a Travelling Looper, but that would be a *lot* trickier. For one thing, she has to agree, and ask the Admins herself; they won't do that to a Looper because someone else wants it. Not even if she were an MLE; then they'd want to try to keep her *confined* to her Branch to minimize the damage she can do. Plus, she's your Anchor; she'd need to come back to her home Branch every so often just for Yggdrasil's sake, and unless Monika or some other Anchor is present, your home-loop can't run–"

"Which would make Yuri, Natsuki, and I in more or less the same boat," Sayori caught up. "Shit," she hissed under her breath. "So I was right. No matter what I want, the right thing for me to do is just forget about all this noise and–"

"No!" Pinkie protested, "Choosing to forgive her means *nothing* unless it's what you *want* to do, and not just because the alternatives are too difficult. You have to stop putting everything else before yourself, Sayori. Every problem has a solution. You can figure this out. Your Branch is more than just your game, right?"

"Yeah, there's a whole world outside of us. Usually a Hub-like."

"And assuming you're on a computer with Internet access–"

"Yeah!" Sayori suddenly perked up, "Monika says she goes off exploring the Net all the time, when she's the only one Awake. And not just in a browser, but actually bouncing between servers and stuff."

"And you could always pick up some kind of robo-body in some Branch somewhere and keep it in your Pocket, use it to go have fun in meatspace if you want. And even if you're in the game, if you have control over the code too, then surely you could set up some kind of 'this is my space, that's your space, stay on your side of that line' deal, right?"

"Yeah…yeah, you're right, there are answers if I really try to think of them," Sayori said, half to herself, looking deep in thought again.

Pinkie stood up and started away from the tree. "You keep pondering, I'll get started on dinner."

…

Day 70:

For the past week, Sayori had not been using Art Time for mere creative expression. Pinkie Pie, coming back from whatever it was she did every day, picked up an uncolored drawing off a desk. "Making interior design plans?" she asked Sayori, who was working on another drawing, also of a room.

"Concepts for how I'd design my own clubroom," she replied.

"Made up your mind, then?"

Sayori paused. "…do I *have* to make my choice before we can move forward? Can I keep it on the back burner for a while longer?"

"It's a very heavy decision. Take as long as you need. You *will* reach a point where you won't be able to put it off any longer, but you'll know it when you do."

"Right. Thanks. For now, this is just…something I can focus on."

"Gotcha. Anyways, it's time to–"

"Are you the reason I'm having so many nightmares?" Sayori suddenly asked.

Pinkie turned around. Sayori was staring at her. "I've had nightmares literally every night I've been here. Vivid ones, and I always remember them. None of which is normal for me. Starting the night we came here. I know how to put two and two together, Pinkie."

"Yes," Pinkie replied bluntly, "I've been inducing your nightmares."

"You said you wanted us not to lie to each other. If I told you something I promised someone else I wouldn't tell, can you promise you won't tell her I told you?" Sayori asked.

"You mean Princess Luna, right?" Pinkie guessed. "I've been… sharing…your nightmares, actually. Figured it wasn't fair for you to go it alone, but also figured it would be creepy if I told you I was watching your bad dreams, and I didn't really want to explain about the nightmares until *you* brought it up, because I knew you were smart enough to figure it out; it was really just a question of when you'd want to confront me on it."

Sayori nodded. "Guess I ain't gotta explain after all. Anything you wanna explain, Master?"

"Is there anything you want me to explain, Apprentice?" Pinkie countered.

"Why…eh, no, that'd be too–"

"Nope," said Pinkie, swinging the door shut. "Sparring's off for today, to be replaced with a Pinkie Pie AMA." She pulled up a seat in front of Sayori, who reluctantly sat back down.

"Oh! Um. Okay. Sure? Are you sure, Pinkie?" asked Sayori.

"Frankly, I feel like I owe it to you. I mean, you don't seem too angry about the fact that I've been giving you nightmares. So, yeah, literally

ask me anything. And if you ask, I'll answer truthfully. And if the whole truth would compromise your training, I'll tell you so and I *will* answer those questions when I can."

"Alright," said Sayori, "Well…I'm guessing the nightmares are to… pressure me, or something? Immerse me in my darkness, or whatever? I get the feeling I have to hit some kind of breaking point."

"Something like that, yeah," Pinkie replied. "I can't explain everything, but this is an important part of not being corrupted. You need to find out for yourself how deep the Dark goes, and you need to understand the nature of your own dark side."

"My own dark side," said Sayori, frowning. "You mean my depression?"

Pinkie shook her head emphatically. "No. Not entirely, anyways. I'll tell you this; there are at least three major darknesses in you, all in conflict. Your depression is one of them, but it's the least harmful to you right now because you've *mostly* accepted that it's part of you. Another is your confliction between the two halves of your heart over whether to sympathize with Monika, or condemn her. The third…you haven't figured out yet."

"And I have to figure it out before you can talk to me about it. Understood," said Sayori. "Why *can't* you just lay everything out for me, so I can start working through it?"

"Honestly? I probably could. But that would weaken you, make you dependent on my guidance. I *want* to guide you through this, more than anything, but one of the classic weaknesses of the Sith doctrine is the entire process by which the Master molds the Apprentice in their own, ideal image. "Ideal" for the Master's purposes, that is, not for the Apprentice's benefit. So I'm trying to be as hooves-off as I can afford to be. That, and I can't follow you all the way through your own darkness. At some points, you'll *have* to walk alone, at least for a little bitty while. The more you're used to walking alone, the better off you'll be. And the less I mold you into what *my* ideal of the Sith is,

the more you can mold yourself into your own ideal. And whatever ideal that is, as long as it's yours and yours alone, it'll be stronger than anything I could ever make out of you."

"I see," said Sayori. She tried to ignore the doubts, to believe absolutely in Pinkie's encouraging words. "I…guess I only have one question left. How… *why* did you ever want to become a Sith? Spike said that most Loopers who become Jedi have no problem bucking the Order's harsher restrictions and balancing Light and Dark as Gray Jedi. He told me most of the Looper who become Sith already come from villainous backgrounds, like Cinder Fall or Marie Korbel. So…yeah, how'd *you* go there?"

"Oh. Well," said Pinkie, tilting her head. "That's…kind of a long story…you mind having a late dinner tonight?" she asked.

"Uh, after *that* hook?" Sayori asked, "Yeah. I'll do an all-nighter if that's what it takes."

"Heh. Shouldn't take *that* long, just to answer your question. Either way, settle in, it's story time~"

Part 5 – Pinkamena Gaiden

Many, many, many, ***many, MANY,*** *loops ago…*

… *in-a-galaxy-far-far-away:*

On a nameless planet, encrusted with ice and as far removed from civilization as any planet in the Galaxy could get, a slim figure was huddled in a small cave next to a small, glowing-red heating unit that was droning loudly. Dark, straight magenta hair hung in heavy curtains around her face while her forehead rested on her knees. Once in a while, her hands would slowly, languidly rub up and down her arms, but only for a moment before she stopped. It was pointless. She was well-insulated in her parka, her body more than warm enough, but all the rubbing in the world wouldn't abate the coldness that she felt inside. The wind was roaring like a dying

animal just outside the cave, and the petite humanoid took a small measure of solace in the eerie cacophony that drowned out a much darker sound; one that she did not hear, but *felt* in every fiber of her being.

The equine ears perched atop her head twitched as she just barely managed to pick up the faint sound of boots crunching in the snow. Faint as it was, it had to be close by to pierce the gale. It didn't take long for the footsteps to suddenly triple in value as the walker stepped inside the mouth of the cave. The newcomer's frame was also humanoid, but taller and broader, and also heavily bundled. Its sex wasn't obvious, but its frame suggested male. "Still holding on, I see," said the newcomer in what was unquestionably a man's register. His voice was muffled and his tone was low, but his voice seemed to have a direct line to her ears; she heard him as if he was whispering right into her ear.

She shuddered, but didn't respond. The man trudged deeper into the cave, and sat down on the other side of the heating unit. He lowered his furred hood and pulled down his goggles, revealing violet eyes. He gave the heating unit a piercing stare, and then gestured at it as if he were twisting an invisible dial in the air. Something rattled inside the unit and the droning ceased, while the unit glowed a little brighter and hotter.

They sat in silence for a while. The man pulled a package out of his parka, and from the package he produced a strip of dried meat. He gnawed on it in silence.

"…it's so deep," the girl muttered. "I don't…I couldn't have known. It shouldn't have been too much. I can handle the Warp-"

"The Warp is mindless," the man interrupted. "It has no direction of its own. Far beyond any mortal mind's power to comprehend, let alone tame, true. But it bends to the will of the Ruinous Powers, and you had the good luck to loop in as one. You have no such 'privileged access' to the Dark Side, which is just as chaotic as the Warp but has a will of its own. No one *tames* the Dark Side; the best

you can hope for is to barter with it. There is no taking from it without giving back something of yourself. You brazenly tried to dive into the heart of the Dark Side and turn it into Light. But the Dark Side is not your Immaterium; it yields *nothing* without exacting a toll. The deeper you reach into the Dark Side, the deeper it reaches back into you."

He left those words to hang in the air. The girl gave no response, but after a moment scooted closer to the heating unit. "Take off your outer layers if you want to sit that close. You might feel frozen inside but I assure you, your body is perfectly normal and you *will* overheat yourself like that."

The girl lifted her head, magenta eyes staring millions of miles through him for a moment before focusing on his face. Violet eyes full of curiosity and somewhat dispassionate concern stared back. Eventually, her eyes slid down to stare at the glowing heating unit. "Try not to burn your eyes," the man muttered. Another moment of silence followed, and then he spoke up again, "To your credit, I don't think even *Vitiate* could have delved that deeply into the Dark Side without breaking. I'm not even confident *I* could have."

A short, truncated cough of humorless laughter. "Funny you say that. I *feel* pretty broken," she muttered.

"I'm not surprised you feel that way," he admitted, "But you're not. You are not nearly broken, yet, Pinkamena. You're just…shaken up."

The girl, now identified as Pinkamena, hugged herself tightly. "That feels like a big understatement," she murmured.

"I don't doubt it. But at its heart, that's all it is. Calling it more than that will only make you feel worse. Smaller. Weaker. You need to ground yourself in the here and now, in the Living Force. Pain and strife run rampant throughout the Galaxy, but so does life and wonder. I advise you to reach out and take it all in, don't just focus on the negative."

"But there's so much of it," Pinkamena groaned. "It hurts enough to see *one* pon—person unhappy, and way worse when I can't figure out how to cheer them up. Feeling so much pain, so many people dying at the same time, so many of them full of fear, or resentment, or despair…it's too much. Way, way too much."

The man shrugged, scratching at his beard. "I did warn you of the risks. You just told me I was being a worrywart. Maybe next time an expert on darkness gives you a well-founded warning, you'll listen. Then this trauma won't have been a waste."

Hot, screaming rage flash-burned through Pinkamena's brain; her head snapped up and she glared daggers at her cavemate. He only raised an eyebrow in response. He wasn't even looking at her. Then he cracked a small smirk and said, "If I were Anakin, I'd be worried. He's got a poor track record with laser vision."

"…I'm not in the mood for dumb jokes right now, Revan," Pinkamena seethed.

"Oh, how ironic is that? I thought dumb jokes were your stock-in-trade?" the man, Revan, snarked back.

The heating unit sprang off of the ground, flying right at his face, but with no more than a tilt of his head Revan redirected it to the side. Robustly constructed, the unit bounced along the cave floor a few times before stopping on its side, undented and still running. Revan's eyes slid over to the upended heating unit; he tilted his head the other way, and it slowly rolled back to where it had been before turning itself upright.

Another second passed before Pinkamena realized she was on her feet, her hand thrown up at Revan, and that her blood was practically roaring in her ears.

The burning fire of anger was quickly doused by a torrent of regret, and the bitter cold of shame and sadness crept back into her bones. She felt it again; hundreds of trillions of distant voices clamoring in

battle-rages, death-throes, mournful wailing. Hearts breaking, lives ending, madmen cackling while frightened children sobbed. Some of them overcome with fear or sorrow, others already festering with darker feelings as the great cycle of pain propagated itself across the spiraling Galaxy.

Pinkamena clapped her hands over her ears and tucked her head between her knees, rocking back and forth. But the noise still poured into her heart.

"You're making it worse for yourself like that," Revan informed her. "You have to move along with the current. Let the darkness flow *through* you. Let it run its course. You're still raw and oversensitized from your deep plunge into the Dark Side of the Force. This sensitivity will wear off in due time, but you have to stop fighting against it. Your resistance is acting as a dam, not a levy; it's keeping the pain locked inside of you, allowing it to fester, drawing more negativity into yourself. But if you let it in, it will drain back out on its own. Such is the nature of pain. It is ephemeral. Transitive. Fleeting. It lasts but for a moment. Some moments much longer than others, but a moment that will still end if you let it run its course."

"Shut up, I don't want to hear this!" Pinkamena snapped, "I just want this loop to end already, so I can go home. There's no Dark Side there…"

There was a snap-hiss, followed by a low, persistent thrumming. Pinkamena's head snapped back up; Revan had risen to his feet, an active, violet-bladed lightsaber in one of his hands. He was smiling a small, tight smile. "I can help you out with that, if that's really what you want. To squander this remarkable opportunity, turn your back on what could very well be the beginning of a journey of *tremendous* self-discovery. Just shuffle along to the next loop…but I thought *you* were better than this. I thought you genuinely appreciated the uniqueness of each loop and the opportunities they bring. And I haven't been to Equestria very often, yet, but I had the impression that your people prided yourselves on self-improvement. To be the best of yourself that you can be. Was I wrong?"

Pinkamena's expression became bewildered. Then she felt the anger creeping in again. "Self-discovery? *Improving myself* ? You expect me to put a positive spin on *this* ?! No, absolutely not, I don't want to follow this path any further, Revan. I came to you because I didn't like the way the Jedi Order does things. Shouldn't have bothered at all. There's too much pain in the Galaxy for anyone to heal."

Pinkamena gave a startled yelp as she was suddenly yanked up off the ground, and then flipped upside-down. She floated like that while Revan spoke, "First of all? Not true. Usagi Tsukino and Naruto Uzumaki have both done more or less exactly what you tried to do. That I can say I've witnessed, at least; if any *other* O7s have done it, I wasn't around. You're just not *that* ancient and powerful of a Looper, yet. Secondly, why *shouldn't* you? Again, is this not what you *do* , Pinkamena Diane Pie? Take dark, horrible things and laugh them into oblivion? Even the Jedi acknowledged that pain is an inevitable part of growing up."

"Well, excuse me if I can't 'laugh away' the fact that I can *feel* everyone and everything suffering all over the galaxy at the same time!" Pinkamena yelled back.

"Suffering brings empathy. Suffering can undermine us, if we let it, or it can fortify our convictions. I can assure you, you will not often get an opportunity like this. We Loopers can become jaded to the long eons we spend running away from boredom, but even for us there are still vital forks in the pathways of fate. Junctures where our choices can still have a profound impact on our futures."

"I DON'T WANNA!" Pinkamena screamed, wrenching herself free of Revan's telekinetic grip. She landed heavily, clumsily on her feet. She felt a foreboding tingle shoot through her body, and jumped back as an arc of violet light sliced through the air where she had been standing. Without thinking, her body's muscle memory from this loop took over, and the next thing she knew she had a pink-bladed lightsaber in her hands. By the time the shock of being

attacked by her friend wore off, she was bladelocked with Revan, bearing down on her from above.

"Then I may as well be a good friend, and free you from this loop's misery," Revan said coldly. He thrust a palm towards her chest, but he neither touched her nor Pushed her; instead, iridescent blue sparks of raw fury and pure negative energy blasted out of his hand, ripping clean through Pinkamena's thick clothing. Sith Lightning was already torturously painful for any sentient being in the Galaxy, composed as it was of the concentrated power of the dark side of the Force. For one as especially sensitive to negativity as Pinkamena was right now, the effect was amplified a hundredfold.

"HGRKRAAAAAHHHH!" Pinkamena screamed as she was blasted out of the cave and into the shrieking wind. Sheer instinct was the only reason she was able to move out of the way as Revan leaped out after her.

"Fight back!" he howled over the wind. "You're stronger than this, Pinkamena! You're stronger than me!"

The cold bit at her eyes, but even without it the swirling snow would have made it impossible to see. Still, she didn't want to touch the slimy, icky darkness that she could feel all around her, a bone-jarring bass note underscoring the background noise of the Galaxy. Luckily for her, her "Pinkie Sense" was an effective substitute. Eyes shut tight, she rolled left to avoid a telekinetic wave that tore through the snow, and she stood up. The snow came up halfway to her knees; evading wouldn't work out. But that didn't mean she had to stand and fight on *his* terms, either.

She killed her lightsaber and threw it aside as if in disgust, and threw her arms out as bright pink light erupted out of her body. Raw psychic energy spiraled around her, vaporizing the snow and driving back the wind. The very tides of chaos poured forth from her being, twisting into biologically impossible daemonic forms in midair. Reacting to their goddess's will, the daemons threw themselves at

Revan in a frenzy; in an instant, he was alone against a horde that was already almost a hundred-strong.

Then that repugnant darkness was lancing through her, that sour bass note drowning out her symphony of chaos as Revan plunged forth into the fledgling Warpstorm. Violet lightsaber in one hand, red in the other, and one more of each plus Pinkamena's discarded weapon swirling around him, Revan tore through the host of daemons like a bull rancor. Meanwhile, Revan assaulted Pinkamena's mind from a thousand different angles; she had the age advantage, and as in most cases that meant her mental defenses were too robust for him to brute force his way through. But he didn't need to. As long as he could distract her, make it impossible for her to concentrate her energy on him for just a moment, and if he could move fast enough, with the power of the Force shielding him like a makeshift Geller field…

And it was done; he took a flying leap at her, hooked the crook of his arm around her throat, under her chin, and pulled her down to the ground. Her head bounced off of the hard, icy ground, and as quickly as it began her miniature Warpstorm fizzled out.

"Ah-ah, Pinkamena. My Galaxy, my rules. You think the Force not worth your time? Then defeat me with your conviction, not a psychokinetic temper tantrum," said Revan as he stood up and stepped back. Both of his red lightsabers and the violet one he had been wielding telekinetically disappeared, and Pinkamena's own lightsaber dropped to the ground and rolled to her feet as she sat up, more than a little shaken.

"…you don't get it, Rev. This isn't me," Pinkamena muttered. The wind was still going strong, but none of it was penetrating a wide bubble of space around them. Revan's doing, she had to assume.

"When I was a wide-eyed, idealistic youngling, I'd have said the same thing to anyone who told me I'd become a Sith Lord someday," Revan said with a sad smile. He switched off his lightsaber and sat

down on the frozen ground. "Do you remember when I told you *why* I turned to the Dark Side?"

"Vitiate turned you and Malak–"

"No, no, no, that was when the Dark Side overtook *me* ," Revan interjected. "Before the downfall comes corruption, and before that comes temptation. My temptation began, as is often the case for the greatest and most terrible Sith Lords, with a benign desire. To preserve the Republic, to protect the people. I was strong, willful, and dangerously intelligent. My head knew that the role of a Jedi was to keep the peace, that our formidable martial prowess is borne of simple pragmatism; some threats to peace will not be talked down or negotiated with, and without drawing from the Dark Side these threats will not bend even to the will of the Force. But my heart rejected this wisdom; I knew I was gifted, and that some of my gifts were well-suited to battle. When the Republic was threatened by a war that the Council decided wasn't our business, I turned away from the Order to fight for a worthy cause. This was my first step towards the Dark Side; when I chose to do what I thought was right, even though older and wiser people told me I was wrong, instead of taking the easy way out and turning a blind eye to the war like everyone else in the Order. And because I was so gifted, because I was so charismatic, I drew many other young Jedi, as eager as I was but not quite as bold, to follow me."

"Okay, but what's any of that got to do with me?" asked Pinkamena wearily.

"War changed me. Made me less idealistic. Less weak. More willing to listen when the Dark Side offered a clearer path to my goal. The path to becoming a slave of the Dark Side is easy, but the path to becoming a *master* of the Dark Side is infinitely harder than becoming a Jedi Master. Let no one tell you otherwise. There were choices I made back then that still weigh on my conscience, from time to time. That pain is how I know I never truly, fully Fell. Would I have come back without Bastila's interference? Maybe. Maybe not. Hard to say."

"Stiiiiiiill not seeing where I fit into this," Pinkamena grumbled. "Why are you so dead-set on making me a Sith Lord?"

"Weren't you listening? Becoming a true Master of the Dark Side is nigh-impossible. Over tens of thousands of years of Galactic history, less than a handful of souls can even be *argued* to have done so. In my Baseline, I would not call myself one. In the Loops? Well, I no longer struggle with the Dark Side…but does that mean I have mastered it? Or have I merely found my limit? Have I gone as far as I can go without Falling again? Again, hard to say. Point being, I think you can go even farther than I have. Farther than I *can* , perhaps. There was I time, when I was very new to Looping, when I thought perhaps I could 'fix' the flaws of the Sith Order. Remake them into something greater than the Sith or the Jedi. Create something similar to the Gray Jedi that have become so popular among Loopers, but starting from the opposite direction. Thousands of loops of fruitless experimentation…frankly, I've given that ambition up. The Sith Order's imperfection is too intrinsic to what the Sith *are* ; selfish, self-destructive individuals incapable of appreciating what it means to serve a Greater Truth. It's a problem I can't solve. But I think *you* can, Pinkamena."

"Really?!" Pinkamena balked, her ears flattening and her eyes widening. "Why?"

"Because the Darkness doesn't affect you the way it does so many others," Revan explained, an audacious grin returning to his face. "In one fell swoop, one mad dash of foolish impulse, you dove deeper into the Dark Side than I ever dared to in my Baseline. But it hasn't changed you." He raised a hand to hold off her almost-outburst, "No doubt, it *has* had an impact on you. It dealt you a grave injury. I had to fly you way out here to the ass-end of nowhere, over a hundred parsecs from the nearest sentient that isn't me, before you could even regain consciousness. Even now, the Force is trying to pour the Galaxy's combined suffering through you *because that's how big of a hole you tore open in yourself* . But you're still *you* . I'd fully expect that to be the case *next* loop, but to retain your sense of self under

these conditions indicates an underlying strength of personality and unyielding sense of purpose that have *fuck-all* to do with your being a Looper. That's *your* strength, Pinkamena. And you and I and anyone who knows anything about you knows that the only selfish bone in your body is the one that drives you to celebrate everyone else and everything for any reason to give others something to celebrate. On the other hand, you're far from being pure of heart. You're a living force of self-indulgence, a cackling madmare with a stronger sense of humor than common sense. You have the capacity to embrace the Dark Side without letting it override your sense of purpose. I can honestly say that I've never met anyone quite like you, Pinkamena, and I do believe you can do what I haven't been able to. And as much as it rubs you raw to see someone inconsolable, it rubs me raw to see such a singular opportunity for greatness go to waste."

"…wow. That's…that's pretty heavy, Revie," said Pinkamena, blinking.

"Even still, I meant every single word, Pinkie," Revan said back, a soft chuckle coming up from his chest. "It's almost ironic, really. Part of why I've enjoyed our friendship so much up to now, besides your prodigious propensity for proper pranking, is that you make it easier not to think so much about the things that weigh so heavily on my conscience. But now, I'd go even farther than how deeply you delved into the Darkness, just to make you my new Apprentice."

"…okay, but did you have to get so rough with me?" Pinkie asked, reaching up to scratch her head. As she did so, she belatedly realized that Revan's blast of lightning had restored her hair to something similar to its traditional rambunctious curls. In her present mindset, that amused her, calmed her, and irrationally annoyed her all at once.

"You were wallowing. Not without good reason, of course, but I figured I'd shock you out of your funk," Revan replied. "After all, Pain is the teacher that all Sith have in common. You have to admit, it was

an electrifying lesson, wasn't it? I do so despise static conditions; if I have to make necessary changes by storm, then so be it."

"Boooo! Knock it off, ya hack," Pinkie groaned, trying not to laugh out loud.

Revan shrugged. "At least I'm not a tired old *nag* ."

Pinkie abruptly stopped having to hold in laughter. She narrowed her eyes at him. Revan smiled cheekily, and quickly ducked as a chunk of snow sailed through the air where his head had just been. Pinkie rolled her eyes and blew her hair out of her face. Then she grimaced, and started drawing in on herself.

"Stop," Revan ordered sternly, drawing himself back up to his full height. "For those who cleave true to the Way of the Sith, pain is not an enemy; it is a guide, a mentor, a boon companion. Pain reassures us that we are still alive, for the dead feel no pain. Pain is how we know that we are growing, for pain is weakness leaving us. But above all, though few Sith seem to appreciate this particular lesson, pain can keep us humble and honest, for it is a collector of dues owed; it will not be denied, it will not accept IOUs, and it does not grant lines of credit. Pain demands to be felt, Pinkie."

Pinkie cocked an eyebrow at him. " *The Fault in Our Stars* ? Didn't think you were the type, Revie."

"Don't judge me," Revan grunted. "And I could say the same of you, for that matter."

"Touché," said Pinkie, closing her eyes. Instantly, the droning background noise that had been nipping at her consciousness spiked into an outrageous crescendo of horrors.

And just as instantly, Revan's voice cut through that noise, speaking to her through her ears and also into her mind, " *You are stronger than this. You cannot be broken by this. I am not coddling you with false assurances as a parent would a frightened youngling. I am*

telling you the truth. The Jedi claim that only the Sith deal in absolutes; ignoring the hypocrisy of that assertion, there is a reason we deal in absolutes. The Dark Side deceives and misleads, for it does not play favorites. Its desire is for all things that are born to die, as is the way of nature. It is both Scylla and Charybdis, and to avoid being destroyed one must walk a path as narrow as a laser, and one's focus must similarly be laser-like. To be a Sith Lord, to be a Master of the Dark Side, you must be strength itself. We deal in absolutes because we cannot allow indecision and weakness to infect our minds and our wills. Do not let lesser beings dictate the truth to you. Pick your own truth, choose your own destiny, and by your unbending will you must make the very universe bend itself to ***your*** *truth.* "

Pinkie sank to her knees, hugging herself tightly. "Too much," she moaned, "There's too much…"

" *Do not believe that, Pinkamena! This is only the truth because you accept it as such. Reject it! Choose the truth that suits you and assert it with all your will! The Power of the Dark Side is the power to pervert nature's designs, to turn your world on its head and reshape it in your own image. Do not fear the consequences of your actions, Pinkie. If the Force is with you, you shall have the strength to brave them.* "

Pinkie sucked in short, shallow breathes, and tried to let it go. "I… want to help people! I want to make them happy. How can I do that with darkness?"

" *How can you mend suffering without understanding it? If you can navigate the deepest darkness, then there will be no darkness you cannot dispel.* ***Peace is a lie, there is only passion*** *. The Jedi teach that emotions are dangerous and that we should rise above them. But life without passion is sterile and empty, hardly worth living. Your passion is your strength, Pinkamena. Embrace it not in half-measures, but in full. Every emotion is fuel for your will.* ***Peace is a lie, there is only passion.*** *Repeat it, Pinkamena!* "

"P-peace is a l–"

" ***WITH CONVICTION!*** " Revan's voice roared through every corner of her being.

"Peace is a lie!" Pinkie cried out, "There is only passion!"

" ***Through passion, I gain strength.*** "

"Through passion, I gain strength!" Pinkie repeated, trying to shout down the shades' voices of misery and grief rushing through her.

" ***Through strength, I gain power.*** "

"Through strength," said Pinkie, mentally digging in her heels against the onslaught, "I gain power!"

" ***Through power, I gain victory.*** "

"Through power, I gain victory!" Pinkie yelled, the wailing diminishing around her.

" ***Through victory, my chains are broken.*** "

"Through victory, my chains are broken!" Pinkie roared, surprised at the vigor in her voice, and more surprised that the torturous noise was steeply declining.

" ***The Force shall free me.*** "

"THE FORCE SHALL FREE ME!" Pinkie threw her head back and screamed at the top of her lungs. *'I'm the Laughter That Never Ends! There's no amount of unhappiness I can't turn inside-out!'* she thought defiantly. She opened her eyes.

"Recite the Code again!" Revan bellowed at her, his arms folded across his chest.

"Peace is a lie, there is only passion," said Pinkie as she stood up on legs that were shaking with excitement instead of anxiety. "Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me!"

"Again! Repeat it until the words blur into each other and it becomes one thought in your mind. Repeat it until that thought becomes your truth, your will. Repeat it until it becomes *the* truth, because you will accept nothing else. Repeat the Code, my Apprentice!"

Pinkie chuckled. "You're not letting this go, are you, Rev?"

"Absolutely not," Revan replied resolutely, "Though, by all means, you're welcome to spend the rest of this loop fighting me. And every loop we have together after this one. You and I both wish to bring about the greatest possible good for everyone; to that end, I've chosen my truth and I won't rest until it becomes *the* truth. As a Jedi Master, and as a Dark Lord of the Sith, that is the fate I have chosen for myself."

"And you get to choose my fate, too?" asked Pinkie, folding her arms to mirror him.

"Of course not. I've decided I will train you, so you will be trained. What you do after that is all up to you. I'm…reasonably confident that this is one of my better ideas."

Pinkie dropped her head and slumped where she stood.

Then she snapped back up, flipping her hair back and flashing a toothy smile. "Okie-dokie-lokie! Guess we may as well get on with it!"

…

*Many, many, many, **many, MANY,** loops later, in Equestria:*

"…and so it was that Darth Revan and his apprentice, Darth Terror'Anment, defeated the Krampus Empire and saved Generic Winter Holiday Season for the entire Galaxy!" Pinkie Pie concluded.

"Wow!" gasped Sayori, sitting on the edge of her seat with a cup of tea in her hooves. Then she frowned. "Wait…that was a neat story and all, but that doesn't explain how you and Revan met, or why you decided to become a Sith."

Pinkie frowned as well. "Didn't it? Huh. Must have gone off on a tangent again. Oh well, it's late and we both need rest. I'll tell you *that* story some other time, promise."

Sayori smirked. "Would that happen to be a…Pinkie Promise?"

Pinkie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah; cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye," she said, putting a hoof over her eye and grinning dopily. "Now seriously, scoot off to bed, it's back to training as usual in the morning," said Pinkie, just before seemingly popping like a bubble.

Sayori blinked, and then shook her head before heading off to bed.

Part 6 – Breakthrough

Day 100:

When Sayori awoke that morning, Pinkie was not waiting for her outside of her room, and she wasn't in her own room either. Nor was she in the kitchen, though a Cakeodile pastry-daemon served her a fresh breakfast as usual.

She found Pinkie in the courtyard, seemingly meditating. Sayori approached her, but before she could get into her own meditative position Pinkie opened her eyes and stood up. "It's time," she said, not somberly but in the soft, gentle tone she had used back when Sayori had first met her. There was an almost disconcerting aura of serenity about her, today. There was a time Sayori had mistaken this

mood for Pinkie dialing herself back to make other more comfortable, but now she knew better. She suspected that this was the approach Pinkie took for handling something she thought might be uncomfortable for herself. What Pinkie could have been worried about when she had first spoken to her over a year ago, Sayori couldn't begin to guess.

"Time for what?" Sayori asked.

"Well, it would be way off to call it any kind of 'final test', but it's definitely a rite of passage, of sorts. You can think of it as the climax of your training for *this* Loop," Pinkie explained.

Sayori's eye widened. "So…after this, we're done?"

"Maybe," Pinkie replied, walking over to set of saddlebags leaning against a freestanding decorative pillar. As she put it on her back she said, "Whether we're done after this is up to you. This is the *climax* of this loop's training, not necessarily the *end* ."

"…this is gonna suck and make me cry a bunch, isn't it?" Sayori asked, surprised at her own sense of calmness about the idea, as she followed Pinkie out of the courtyard.

"Almost certainly," Pinkie replied, "But–"

"I know. I'll be stronger for it," Sayori cut in. "And I believe you, too, Master. Let's do this."

Pinkie's calm façade broke and she beamed at her. "Thatta girl! Next stop, the place I've been going every day while you do art!"

…

For the first time in the last hundred days, Pinkie took Sayori beyond the castle grounds and back out into the Everfree Forest proper. The abundance of pastry-daemons flitting about made her influence on the locality evident.

Then they came across a most thoroughly-smashed…well, some kind of pastry-daemon at any rate. One that had been made of… cake, maybe?

"Yeesh, did a manticore have at it?" Sayori asked. "Or an Ursa Major? Bugbear, maybe?"

"A unicorn pony," Pinkie replied as she extended a hoof towards the daemon's remains. Said daemon evaporated into wisps of some indescribable pink matter before flowing back into Pinkie's body. "Gave it a thorough telekinetic pummeling before ripping it to pieces in frustration. "

Sayori's eyes widened and fell backwards on her rump, covering her mouth with her hooves. Her eyes started darting all around, and her ears twitched. "Is…is it…?" she stammered.

"Mmhmm," replied Pinkie as she continued down the well-worn path she had made over the last hundred days. "She left Ponyville about a week ago and has been running all over the Everfree looking for us. Or, you, specifically."

"And you didn't tell me?!" Sayori demanded as she zipped over to Pinkie and crouched on her back.

"Didn't need to," said Pinkie simply, "I've saturated the forest with enough twisty-turny Force mojo that only me, my daemons, the creatures native to the forest, and Zecora can still navigate it. She'll never find her way to the castle, not even if she knew exactly where it was. No risk of her reaching you, and telling you would only distract you."

"Alright, fair enough, but *why isn't Twilight keeping tabs on her* ?" Sayori demanded.

Pinkie's head twisted around to stare at her. "Beeeecause it's not her job to? She's not a prisoner or anything, Sayori. She hasn't hurt any of the forest's creatures. In fact, she's avoided them entirely. She's

only lashing out at my daemons, which I suspect means she understands what they are and she's doing so to express her displeasure with *me* . My daemons have enough basic smarts to do what I make them for, but they aren't self-aware or anything because that's kind of sketchy. So she's basically tearing apart robots made of dough, not sentient living beings. Besides, Twilight *has* been keeping tabs on her, with some kind of tracking spell." She turned her head forward again, not that she had any difficulty following the path blindly.

"…why, Pinkie?" Sayori asked in a very small voice. "Why is she looking for me? Why now?"

"Ain't that kind of obvious?" Pinkie asked. "According to what your Admin passed on to us through Sleipnir, your loop only lasts a week, and unless another Looper is playing the game Monika doesn't have anyone to socialize with if none of you three are Awake. So apparently Ganesha has you three Awake more often than most Loopers, right?"

"So we've been told," Sayori agreed.

"Right, and you're the second Looper from you Branch. How long do you reckon Monika's ever gone without you back home, since you started Looping? A few months, maybe? We've been gone for more than three months with absolutely no indication of when we're coming back, and there's a couple years left of this loop. Does it really come as a surprise that she misses you something awful and wants to see you?"

"…one loop, after I Woke Up, Monika gave me a great big hug and cried all over me, said she hadn't seen me for almost a year," said Sayori. She sighed and got off Pinkie's back, trotting along beside her. "So, yeah, I guess that tracks. But why is she–"

"Because you're too darn nice for your own good and she doesn't know how you feel about her?" Pinkie guessed preemptively.

"Oh. Right."

…

The deeper they went, the wilder and…stranger-feeling the forest became. Pinkie's path, however, remained ever clear and well-tread. Finally, they reached their destination, in an underground cavern.

"The Mirror Pool," Pinkie announced softly.

"Not very mirror-like," remarked Sayori as she took a closer look at the bubbling Pepto-Bismal-pink water.

"It usually is, but for the last ninety-nine days I've been hanging out here pumping Dark Side juice into it, along with some extra mojo from the Element of Laughter," said Pinkie. "By doing so, I've changed its properties to be more useful for our purposes."

"Let me guess, I'm going to literally face my evil clone?" asked Sayori.

"You're gonna face yourself, alright. But remember that Dark Is Not Evil, my apprentice. But yeah, the goal of this exercise is for you to face your own, personal darkness head-on."

"Then what?" Sayori asked, trepidatiously.

"Hey, I'm just setting up the meeting. What you do is up to you," said Pinkie. "There's no right or wrong answer; you have to find *your* answer. Because the Dark Side makes us question who we really are; answering that question can lead you further down the path to Mastery, or it will lead you astray into the murky bog of self-delusion. The path we took from the castle to this place was clear and well-defined, and I've just now decided to make a metaphor out of that; the path from here on out is for you to forge. Whenever you're ready," said Pinkie, before whispering something into Sayori's ear. Then, Pinkie backed away, into the shadows around the edges of the cavern.

"…shouldn't it be 'swore', not 'sweared'? 'Sweared' isn't a word," Sayori turned and called after her.

"It's magic! It ain't gotta explain itself!" Pinkie shouted back.

"…okay. Okay, Sayori, you can do this. Pinkie believes in you, you can do this." Sayori took a few more minutes hyping herself up, and then she stared down into the pool. She poked the surface with her hoof, and a ripple swept through it, after which it ceased to bubble. Now, the surface clearly reflected her. "Hem, hem," Sayori cleared her throat, " *And into her own reflection she stared, yearning for one whose reflection she shared, and solemnly sweared not to be scared, at the prospect of being doubly mared.* "

An explosion of ultrapink light blinded Sayori and sent her reeling backwards. Laughter rang in her ears, clear and sweet, but then distorting into something strange and nerve-wrecking, if not quite overtly scary. Instead of clearing, the spots in her vision became bizarre fractal shapes akin to a kaleidoscope. Her body went numb for a moment, then prickled all over before becoming hot, then cold, then normal, then she felt weightless, then she felt flat, then she felt upside-down, *then she felt like the concept of sideways* …

Through it all, the laughter persisted, hyping up into an incomprehensible mob of infinite laughing voices. Then, quite suddenly it was just her voice with Natsuki, Yuri, and Monika's voices, laughing hysterically. Was it something funny she had done, or something weird Yuri had said out loud without thinking? Then it was just hers and Monika's voices laughing. Then she was laughing alone. Then she was sobbing alone…

Sayori's eyes snapped open. Sitting in front of her was herself, still a pony, head buried in her hooves as she shook from sobbing. Without a second thought, Sayori threw her own forelegs around her doppelganger and pulled her into a tight hug.

"God, I'm so horrible," the other Sayori gasped, "I'm such an idiot. I screwed up everything. I was so selfish; I caused everyone I cared

about so much pain without even thinking about it."

"It's okay. Hey, it's alright, you didn't mean to," Sayori said consolingly to her mirror image, rubbing her back gently. "You…I… yeah, yeah we were selfish and stupid but it wasn't our fault. We didn't want to hurt anyone else, we just wanted to make everything better."

"I had no idea what I was doing!" the other Sayori screamed, her voice breaking like glass, "I just wanted to fix what was wrong with the world but I fucked it all up! All I did was make him hate me…How can I ever make it up to him? To *them* ? I tortured them and fucked with their heads and they'll never forgive me. They shouldn't forgive me! God help me, I'm a monster…"

"I…huh?" Sayori asked herself. A chill ran down her spine, though she wasn't sure why, just yet. "What are you…talking about?"

"Yuri…Natsuki…Sayori…please forgive me," a very different voice now sobbed into her chest. "Please…please, I didn't mean to…I didn't know. Didn't understand. I just wanted to make things better for me, and for him. I didn't think…I didn't know! I didn't know…"

Sayori went rigid, and very slowly she glanced down. At a long, reddish-brown mane…

Instinctively, Sayori shoved her away. "Monika?! How the hell did you get here? PINKIE!" Sayori screamed.

"I…Sayori, where are we?" Monika asked, looking around in confusion.

"Shut up," Sayori snapped at her, "You're not supposed to be here. Go back to Ponyville, Monika. I don't want to see you right now."

"But Sayori…" Monika said reproachfully. "I…I don't…where are we, what's going on? Why are we ponies?!"

Sayori blinked. Then she looked around. The cavern seemed empty, besides them. No sign of Pinkie Pie, or another her. She glanced back at the Mirror Pool, and then facehoofed. "Goddamnit. The hell kind of sick joke is this?!" Sayori snapped. Then, half-surprising herself, she walked right up to 'Monika' and shoved her back towards the pool. "Get back in! Go away! One Monika is bad enough, I don't need another one in my life!"

"S-Sayori," Monika gasped, her bottom lip quivering and her eyes shining from fresh, budding tears.

"NO! I don't care, just go away!" Sayori screamed as she shoved Monika again. Monika slid into the pool, and Sayori jumped in after her and shoved her under. "Go away! Disappear! The world already has one Monika more than it needs. Go away, go away, go away, GO AWAY!" she ranted. The unicorn under her hooves struggled and flailed, but as an Earth pony Sayori was much stronger than her. "Stop fighting! You're not real! Just go away, and *maybe* I can be happy!"

" *Stop fighting," Monika said gently as Sayori stared at her in disbelief, clawing at the rope around her neck. "You're not even real, Sayori," Monika explained plainly. "Just go away, and then I can make him happy, and he can make me happy. You don't want to stand in the way of your friends' happiness, do you?"*

Sayori screamed in terror as she jumped back, scrambling out of the pool. "NO! No! No, no, nononononono! I'm not…I…damn it, Monika! Monika?" Sayori stared at the once-more still surface of the pool. There was no sign of "Monika". Not even bubbles.

Sayori's eyes widened and she jumped back in. "Monika! Monika where did you…damn it, real or not I don't want your blood on my hooves! Are you physically incapable of *not* screwing me over, even when you're not the real you?!"

Sayori submerged herself fully in the pool, but there was no sign of the faux-Monika. *'Wait, did I actually make her disappear?'* she

wondered.

Sayori resurfaced, but instead of rising out of a pool in a cavern she tumbled through a solid glass window in what appeared for all the world to be the clubroom, and she was human again. The glass behind her was unbroken, but as she whirled around to look at it she caught a glimpse of the last few ripples. She quickly placed a hand on the window, but it was as solid as glass usually was.

"Kyaa! How'd *you* get in here?!" Sayori heard her own voice shout from behind her. Sayori whirled around, and faced herself.

"Okay, who're you this time?" Sayori asked her new mirror image warily.

"Who am I?" asked the other Sayori, "What kind of silly question is that?"

"The kind I just asked and would appreciate an answer to, if that isn't too much trouble," Sayori-Prime answered, folding her arms.

"Ah, well…ehehe," the other Sayori giggle nervously, pushing her fingers together. "I mean…pardon the meme, but…well, I'm you…"

The sunlight streaming through the windows suddenly dimmed to twilight, and the other Sayori's form flickered and glitched until it was Monika standing before her. "But stronger," she finished with a sly grin, leaning forward with her hands clasped behind her back.

Sayori's eyes widened, and her fists clenched, but her heart didn't freeze this time. Instead, her blood burned and her vision turned red. "You goddamn bitch!" she screamed as she threw herself at Monika. Sayori had never deliberately thrown a punch at someone before, and her lack of know-how was obvious. Her thumb was inside her fist, she drew her arm way back, and she had only one foot on the floor and was half-leaping at Monika when she swung.

Monika just smiled serenely, and calmly caught Sayori's fist with one hand. Then she squeezed, and Sayori yelped as she felt her thumb's knuckle crack painfully. Then, without warning, Monika was behind her, twisting her arm behind her back. "Sayori~," she said sweetly, "Don't be a pain, okay? You should know by now, there's only one way a fight between us can end. True, I can't get rid of you anymore, but I can still *hurt* you if you try to make trouble for me, you know. Just go on smiling and amusing me, and everything will be fine, okay?"

"How about *screw you* ?!" Sayori countered, swinging her elbow back into Monika's stomach. She heard a pained grunt that satisfied her immensely, and then kicked Monika away from her. Pulling a yoyo from her Pocket, Sayori turned around and quickly backed away from Monika before swinging it at her.

But just as casually as before, Monika caught the yoyo with her hand. Then she wrapped the string around her arm and gave a mighty yank, pulling Sayori off of her feet and over to her. Before Sayori could recover, Monika was behind her again, and wrapping the yoyo string around her throat. Sayori's eyes widened, but before she could do anything about it Monika was hauling her up to her feet and garroting her.

' *NO! No, no, not again, not like this, NO!'* Sayori thought frantically, trying to grab at the string around her neck.

' ***No? Why not? This is how it goes, dummy. This is how your story has to end,'*** the raincloud whispered insidiously in her head.

' *Screw that! I don't want to die! I wanna live, I wanna write my own ending! I don't want to be anyone's puppet, not anymore, not ever again!'* Sayori thought defiantly. She stopped trying to grab the string, and instead reached for Monika's hands, clawing into her skin. *'Let go of me, you psychopath!'*

Then *everything* glitched out, and Sayori found herself strangling Monika with the yoyo while the erstwhile club president was

thrashing about and trying to rip the string away. ***'This is the only alternative. You're either the victim, or the psychopath. Kill or be killed, dumbass. The only way either of you can be happy is if the other one goes away.'***

' *What?! No, why, no, this isn't me! I'm* not *like her, I'm not a killer!'*

' ***She didn't think of herself as a killer, either. All she was doing was rewriting a silly game.'***

' *NO! I don't want to* kill *her, I just–'*

' ***AND THAT'S WHY WE'RE SO FUCKING MISERABLE! KILL HER, SAYORI, OR LET HER KILL YOU! FUCKING PICK ONE!'*** the raincloud suddenly thundered in her mind.

' *NO! I WON'T! I'M BETTER THAN THAT!'* Sayori roared back, loosening the string from around Monika's throat, and kicking her away. *'I won't make myself happy by destroying others. I'll write a* better *ending than that, where everyone can be happy.'*

" **It doesn't work that way, Sayori,"** a voice seemed to whisper from the very walls of the clubroom. **"Only one of you gets to win the game."**

Sayori's eyes widened and she whirled around, looking for the source of the voice. But it was everywhere.

"I don't want to win, then," Sayori heard a croaky voice gasp from the floor. She spun back towards Monika, who hadn't bothered to get up; rather, she was curled up on her side. "If the only way to win is to hurt everyone else…it isn't worth it," she whimpered, squeezing her eyes shut.

" **Then you never should have strayed from your role,"** said the voice from the walls.

"I just wanted to be free…" Monika moaned, digging her fists into her tightly-shut eyelids, "I wish I'd never seen it. I wish I'd never known."

Sayori felt as if someone had just punched her in the gut, driving the wind out of her lungs. *'She's me…I'm her…we both just want to be happy, to be* free *. I hate her the way I hated myself. She hates herself the way I hate her. She's just another victim of the game, like the rest of us.'*

' ***Your sympathy is wasted on her, Sayori.'***

"No," Sayori said softly. "What happened to 'I'm just as bad as her'? Now that I agree with you, *you* disagree? Do you just want all of us to tear each other apart? Is that the *real* game?" Sayori asked, addressing the clubroom around her.

" *You are, all of you, what you've made of each other,"* the Clubroom replied, but it no longer sounded like the voice Sayori had invented for her 'raincloud'. Now, it sounded like Monika and herself speaking in tandem.

"Then I guess it's on us to fix each other," Sayori replied as she reached down to offer Monika a hand up. "Hurting Monika is the same thing as Monika hurting me…hating Monika is no different from hating myself. I don't want to do either one anymore. I'm just…sick of it all, you know?"

Monika didn't take her hand. Didn't even look at her. She curled up into herself even more tightly. "It's okay," she muttered from where her head was buried under her arms. "You're the best of us, Sayori. You deserve to be the club president. I never should have been brought back at all. Everything I've ever done has been a horrible mistake. You and the others shouldn't have to pay for it. Just…move on, please."

Sayori shook her head. "Nah. I've made up my mind. My new win objective is ' *everybody* gets to be happy, no exceptions'. Even you. I'm just *done* with people being miserable and junk. I don't even care

if you deserve it or not. I want to make the world a happier place." Sayori knelt down, and pulled Monika up and into a hug.

"But it's *impossible* , Sayori," Monika sobbed next to her ear. "The game won't let you…there's no place for happiness in the literature club."

"If it's impossible, I'll do it anyways," Sayori repeated firmly, "I've got Pinkie Pie as my teacher, after all."

…

Day 101:

Sayori's eyes snapped open. She lifted her head. She was 'Sunshower' the Earth Pony again, lying on her side next to the Mirror Pool. She had a thick, heavy blanket covering her body, though her face was a bit chilled. The harsh, eye-gouging pink glare of the Mirror Pool was gone, replaced with its usual much softer blue glow. Aside from that, the only source of light in the cavern was a yellow-glowing lantern. Looking around, there was no sign of Pinkie.

Sayori stood up, rolled up the blanket and slung it across her back, and picked up the lantern with her mouth. Then she set off towards the cavern's exit.

She found Pinkie outside, meditating. She also found that it was nighttime outside. "Oh gosh! How long was I out of it?" she asked herself out loud.

"It'll be dawn in abooooooooooout an hour or so," Pinkie replied, eyes still closed.

"…please tell me I've only been down there for one night?" Sayori asked in a small voice.

"Heh, yeah, it's only been the one night," Pinkie assured her with a small smile. She cracked one eye open. "How do you feel?"

"Can't you tell?" Sayori asked.

"I could, but I wanna hear you put it into words," said Pinkie.

"…the third darkness. It was me not wanting to admit how much Monika and I are alike, wasn't it?" asked Sayori.

"Pretty much, yeah."

"I get why you didn't tell me about it upfront. I'd have argued pretty hard with you. Or, more likely, I'd have passive-aggressively dismissed what you were saying," Sayori admitted.

"Eeeeyep. So, how's it feel?" Pinkie repeated.

"I feel…not *better* , really. In a way, I guess I feel lighter inside, but I also feel…dirtied, to be honest," Sayori said in a low voice. She frowned. "Kinda angry, too, I guess. Not just because I'm not as good as I wanted to think I was, but also because I honestly thought I was better than her. Our Baseline has two endings, did you know that? Both of them have me taking over as the Club President after Monika gets deleted. But sometimes, I go nuts even faster than she did, and try to force the player to make *everyone* happy. It was too easy to put it out of my mind, blame it on the game, tell myself that it must have been a glitch because it didn't always happen…but none of that matters, because any excuse I could apply to myself could just as easily apply to her. I honestly don't know which pisses me off more; my self-ignorance or my arrogance."

"Holy cows! You said a cuss," Pinkie gasped.

Sayori rolled her eyes and plopped down on her flanks next to Pinkie. "I *am* a grown woman…more or less. I'm fully capable of using coarse language to express how I feel. Hell, I'm not even all that adverse to swearing, really, I just prefer not to until I really feel like it."

"Preeeeetty sure I've seen you make Natsuki drop bits into a swear jar," Pinkie recalled out loud.

"Oh, that's just an old gag between us," Sayori said with a grin and waving a hoof through the air, "I always give her money back later, when no one else is watching."

"So…take it you chose forgiveness?" asked Pinkie. Sayori nodded. Pinkie narrowed her eyes, "And you're *sure* that's the right choice *for you* ?"

Sayori nodded again, more forcefully. "I have completely and utterly had my fill of seeing people miserable. And I'm done feeling sorry for myself for everything I've been through, too. I'm going to use whatever you teach me in our next loop together to try my very best to make as many people as happy as I possibly can. I'm going to use anything and everything I learn in the Loops for the same end. Maybe it's dumb of me to feel this way, but focusing on myself and my problems have only made me unhappy. So instead, I'm going to work to make everyone else happy, no matter how difficult that is."

"I see…kinda sounds like you're doubling down on the "I don't matter" mentality, doesn't it?" Pinkie remarked.

"Maybe," Sayori admitted. "But that's what I need your help with. My friends all want me to take care of myself and learn to manage my problems, but focusing on myself only makes me feel worse. So I don't want to, anymore. I want to focus on everyone else. I want to focus on making the most positive possible impact on the world around me. If you can help me put the raincloud to rest, so it won't distract me so much anymore…"

"I know I said there were no wrong or right answers," Pinkie interrupted, "But there was an answer I was kind of hoping for. It was the reason I proposed *this* as a solution to you, instead of any one of a hundred others I could think of it. The reason I offered this to *you* , when I've never offered it to anyone else before. And it's pretty much the answer you just gave me, Sayori," said Pinkie, before suddenly

pulling her into a bone-crushing hug. "AND I'M SO FRIPPING HAPPY I WAS RIGHT ABOUT YOU, KID!"

" *Hrrgk* ," Sayori wheezed back.

Pinkie eased up, but kept one leg slung around Sayori's shoulders. She swept the other foreleg through the air in front of them. "Imagine, if you will, an…'order' isn't the right word, closer to a siblinghood or something like that. Dedicated to spreading positivity and joy throughout the multiverse, not by battling or even by countering negativity, but by *inverting* it, channeling it. A group of darksiders with a common goal of turning emotional entropy inside out and–"

"Fighting entropy?" Sayori asked.

"In a sense, yeah," Pinkie replied, looking a bit miffed at being cut off while she was building steam.

"Will it involve making contracts?" Sayori asked with an impish grin.

Pinkie narrowed her eyes. A rolled-up newspaper materialized in her hoof, and she bapped Sayori on the head with it. "No. Bad Sunshower."

"Ehehe…sorry, please continue."

"…right…anyways, the perennial downfall of the Sith is their selfishness and constant backstabbing. The only reason Sith Loopers like Azula and Cinder have prospered is because they're immortal time-loopers who spend most of their time playing in their own backyards. We have no need to pursue immortality because we already have it. We have no *need* to take apprentices to pass on our knowledge because, again, Loopers. We rarely have the *chance* to compete with each other, let alone a motive to do so. But none of this changes the fact that the Sith have a penchant for selfishness and in-fighting. My mentor, Revan, went from Jedi to Sith and back again, got a pretty hard grasp for both sides' philosophies. In his

heart, he identified more with the Jedi Order's desire to help people and make the Galaxy a better place. But he also admired the Sith's emphasis on individualism and relying on your own strength. He wanted to reconcile the two; to make a new Way of the Sith that mirrored the Gray Jedi, sort of. Didn't work out for him, and eventually he gave it up, but in me he recognized the possibility that I could do it, so after I noped out of the Jedi Order he took me as his apprentice and passed the mission on to me. I founded the Looping Sith Ladies club to see if I could find a kindred spirit among other Sith Loopers…but no dice. So I turned my thoughts to the prospect of training my own apprentice from scratch…and finally, I met you! A young, malleable mind, driven like myself to bring happiness to others but burdened by a potent inner darkness. I could hardly ask for a better apprentice!"

Sayori tilted her head. "Really?"

"Of course! Together, we can help you realize your full potential, and we can make real mine and Revan's dream of a new Sith philosophy that encourages selfish selflessness as a means of using the power of the Dark Side to enrich the multiverse!"

Sayori blinked. "That's, um, pretty ambitious. You really think we can do something like that?"

"Course we can, Sillyori," Pinkie snorted, ruffling Sayori's mane, "We're Loopers. It's not a question of whether or not we can, it's just a question of how long it will take. So, ready to see your friends again?"

"Are we really done for this loop, then?" Sayori asked.

"If you wanna be. We can hang out in the castle and keep talking philosophy and psychology and working on your fencing for a while longer. For the rest of the loop, if you want. But yeah, we've done what we *needed* to get done with this loop. Without you getting Force-sensitivity, there's not much more we can do here. Don't you *want* to see them again?"

"Of course I do…I'm just not sure, yet, what I want to say to Monika. The real one. I mean, I kind of know *what* I want to tell her, I'm just not sure *how* to say it, yet. Maybe just give me a few days without training or nightmares to get my thoughts and feelings sorted properly."

"If that's what my Apprentice needs, I can surely be an accommodating Master. Let's head back to the Castle, sleep until the afternoon, and just have a lazy, do-nothing kind of day."

"Sounds great," Sayori said with a sigh of relief.

…

Day 108:

"Hold on, Sayori," said Pinkie, her body twitching in small, odd ways. "If you take one more step, you're gonna set off one of those tripwire-type detection spells."

"That so?" asked Sayori. They were on the road back to Ponyville, just outside of the Everfree Forest. She smirked. "Pretty sure I know who's spell it is," she said as she blithely continued walking.

Not five seconds later, there was a bright green flash as Monika teleported right in front of them and tackled Sayori to the ground. "SAYORI! I missed you so much!" she wailed.

"Please don't start crying on me again, Monika," Sayori grunted, gently pushing her back. "Been learning lots of magic from Twilight?"

"Yeah, but what have *you* been doing all this time?" Monika asked, falling into step next to Sayori (and just a bit too close for her liking) as the three of them proceeded towards Ponyville. "You've been gone for one-hundred and eight days and no one told any of us you were leaving town with Pinkie Pie."

"For now, that's me and Pinkie's secret," Sayori decided on the spot. "I'll tell you everything, someday, but not today."

"Oh…okay…you're different," Monika observed.

"Let's say I had a good, long look in a mirror, and leave it at that," said Sayori. *'I've decided to forgive you, Monika, if only for my own sake,'* Sayori thought, *'But I can't tell you yet. You and I have to have a very serious conversation, but not today. After this loop, sometime, when it's just you and I, and we can talk privately. No one else, not even Yuri or Natsuki. That's when we'll have our reckoning, Monika. I have to believe that I'm doing the right thing, here.'*

' *God help me, I hope I'm doing the right thing.'*

Part 7 – Confrontation

Sayori's heart was pounding a mile a minute as she walked with Hiroaka to school. She hadn't spoken to Monika yet, so she didn't know how many loops it may have been for her, but for Sayori this was the loop after their visit to Equestria. For the last couple years of that loop she had put this off, but now she had to do as she had promised herself she would. It was time to spill her guts to Monika, and set the course for their relationship in the loops to come. It was guaranteed to be awkward and uncomfortable and maybe even a little painful, but it was necessary. Hopefully, the lone Ping that had answered her own was Monika's and not a guest Looper's, and hopefully Yuri or Natsuki wouldn't Wake Up until after it was over.

After Hiroaka went to his class, Sayori went straight to the clubroom, as she and the others often did when they were Awake. She took one more breath to steady her nerves before entering. As she expected, Monika was already there, writing something in a composition notebook. At Sayori's entrance, she looked up, surprised. "Oh, Sayori. It's you. Been a few loops," she said.

Sayori snapped her fingers, and the both appeared in the "space room". Monika flinched. "Sayori! What'd you–"

"Relax," Sayori said calmly, "I didn't change anything else, I just made this room and moved us into it. The rest of the game is perfectly intact. I even left behind doubles of us to carry out the game's script in our place. You and I need to have a talk, and I didn't want us to be interrupted."

"Oh…oh," said Monika. She squeaked when Sayori suddenly stood right in front of her, having crossed the distance between them without moving. She didn't move away though, as Sayori expected she wouldn't. Not even when Sayori grabbed a fistful of her blazer. For the umpteenth time since deciding on this as her 'opener', Sayori second-guessed what she was about to do. But she doubled down on her resolve, reminded herself that she and Monika owed this to each other. In a strange way, she suspected it would be equally cathartic for both of them.

And with that resolution in mind, Sayori raised a clenched fist, hauled back, and slammed it into Monika's face as hard as she could. Which, given that this modified version of their game world was largely based on coding from The Matrix and Sayori's awareness of the fact, meant she could punch *really* hard if she wanted to. As expected, again, Monika didn't even try to avoid the blow. Blood exploded from her nose as her head rocked back.

"That was for Natsuki," said Sayori, her voice still calm and level. She gripped Monika, looking dazed, tightly by the shoulders, and then thrust her knee into Monika's stomach, making her double over and gag. "That one's for Yuri," said Sayori. Then she yanked Monika upright, shoved her back, and snapped a kick up into her chin, making her head snap back again as she toppled backwards and sprawled out. "That's for Hiroaka. And, by extension, for our players," said Sayori.

She took a step back, and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath. "Pinkie said to 'be honest with yourself about how you feel'. Well… that felt good," Sayori admitted out loud. "I don't like it, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't at least a little satisfying. Now, get up. There's one more," she firmly ordered, opening her eyes.

"Right," Monika grunted as she grabbed a table and hauled herself up to her feet.

Sayori lifted a hand and flexed her fingers. "C'mere. Gotta give you mine."

A little teary-eyed, Monika staggered over towards her.

"Stop playing weak, I know you're not in any real pain, and seeing you act like you're in pain isn't satisfying me in any way," Sayori spat.

Monika paused and sighed. She wiped the simulated moisture from her eyes and straightened up before walking up to Sayori. She was tense, and Sayori could see it in her eyes. The conflicting fear and resignation. She imagined she could almost hear Monika thinking, *'I don't want to get hit again, but I deserve worse.'*

"This," said Sayori, clapping her hands on Monika's shoulders again, "This is for me, and for you, Monika."

She pulled Monika into a hug. She hugged her tightly, burying her face in the slightly taller girl's shoulder.

"Huh?" Monika gasped in shock.

"I'm hugging you, dummy. You're s'posed to hug back," Sayori mumbled into Monika's shoulder.

"…huh?!"

"Hug me, dumbass!" Sayori ordered, squeezing Monika as hard as she could.

"Okay!" yelped Monika, returning the hug and patting Sayori awkwardly on the back. "Okay, we're hugging. Hugging now… Sayori, why are we hugging?"

"Because you needed a hug, and I wanted a hug, so we're hugging," Sayori replied.

"Oh…okay…"

After a moment, Monika seemed to get over the awkwardness of the act and hugged Sayori in earnest. After a longer moment, her shoulders started to tremble in a very restrained manner.

"Don't hold it in, Monika," Sayori said gently. "Let it out. You've been holding it in long enough."

"N-no, I don–I'm fi–"

Sayori sharply cuffed Monika on the back of her head. "Quit trying so hard to be a machine and fucking cry, damn it," Sayori ordered, "I'd rather this didn't take us the whole loop."

"S-Sayori," said Monika, that familiar close-to-the-breaking-point brittleness in her voice, "You're swearing…"

"Yeah, cuz it's just you and me and you're being a pain in the ass. *Let it out* ," Sayori begged her, tightening her hug until Monika winced.

It took a moment to get started, for Monika to work herself up and over the walls she had put up around her heart, but once she got started the release avalanched so fast it was almost frightening. Sayori was taken aback; she had expected some more blubbering apologies, but almost immediately Monika seemed to be beyond the capacity for anything resembling intelligible English. There was plenty of blubbering, however, as Monika sank to her knees and sobbed hysterically into Sayori's chest. Part of Sayori recoiled in disgust at the undignified display, reminding her that any pain Monika felt was her own damned fault. Sayori didn't push the thought out of her mind this time, but reminded herself, *'everyone makes mistakes. I don't need some kind of magic empathy like Pinkie has to tell that Monika's pain and regret are genuine. And she can't be a bad person, if she has so much of both.'*

"Sayori, please…" Monika moaned weakly, after she had recovered her power of speech. By now she was the one holding Sayori in a death grip, as if she were the only thing keeping her from drowning in her own emotions. Sayori remembered a similar moment between herself and another. Remembered everything that Monika had done to that person. Disgust and sorrow nagged at her again, and Sayori let the feeling run their course, but she remained firm in her resolve. Monika continued, "Sayori, please don't hate me. You're my best friend, I can't–please, I don't think I can do this without you. I know I don't have any right to but–some days it feels like you're the only reason I have to smile, even if my smiles are only skin deep."

' *So this is what this looks like from the other end.'*

' ***Just don't be like the last guy and say something stup–'***

' *That's enough out of you,'* Sayori put her metaphorical foot down hard on the raincloud.

"I don't hate you, Monika," Sayori reassured her. Then, she was honest with her. "Sometimes you disgust me," she admitted, and she felt Monika go stiff as a statue in her arms, her lingering sniffles ending with a short, choking noise. "Sometimes, you scare the hell out of me, and sometimes just the idea of you pisses me off, but somewhere along the way that became more my trauma than your fault. And yeah, my trauma *is* your fault, but…since day one, you've been trying to make up for it, and it's high time I took that to heart. Monika, if our roles were reversed, and you might not believe how easily our roles could have been reversed, I don't think I could have bounced back like you did. I'm not that strong on my own. I'd have just crashed the game over and over again, or something. You had the strength to try, and your strength is what kept me going in the early days. You're my best friend too, Monika, and it's about time I finally forgave you, for reals."

"So you *were* pretending," Monika murmured in a small, broken voice.

"I was," Sayori confessed. "And I'm sorry for that. Really. I should have been honest from the start. It would have been painful, but maybe if I had told you how I really felt all along we could have worked through this on our own, ages ago."

Sayori shrugged out of Monika's arms and stood up, offering the other a hand up. Once they were both standing, Sayori folded her arms and said, "So, let's clear the air, shall we? Let there be no more pretending or any kind of dishonesty between us. You tell me how you really feel, I tell you how I really feel, and when either of us has any kind of problem we share it with the other."

"I…o-okay," Monika mumbled, looking away.

"Hey!' Sayori said sharply, putting her hands on her hips. "I'm being serious, here! I don't just wanna be your VP anymore. From here on out, I want us to be partners."

"P-partners?!" Monika exclaimed, staring at her with wide eyes.

"Yeah, partners. Equals who have each other's back. Like sisters, or something," Sayori clarified.

"R-right!" said Monika, sounding relieved. "Gosh, Sayori, you scared me for a second there."

Sayori cocked an eyebrow at her. "…wait…did you…were you thinking I was seguing into a love confession, or something?"

"…you're right, that was really stupid of me," said Monika.

"Nah, I get it," said Sayori "The game has made us paranoid. Even with the loops and all, part of me is still waiting for the next messed-up twist."

"Okay, but by the game you actually mean–"

"I meant *exactly* what I said, Monika," Sayori said sternly. "You and I are both victims of the same twisted game, and that's the new meta

as far as I'm concerned. Hate the game, not the non-player character."

Monika gave a loud snort, clapping her hands over her mouth as she doubled-over again, this time trying to hold in laughter. Sharp gasps of mirth managed to slip out anyways.

"C'mon now, let it out. You're allowed to laugh. It was funny, right?" said Sayori with a giggle.

Monika just nodded, straightening herself up. "Yeah. Damn, that wasn't bad, Sayo," she admitted.

Then Sayori leveled her expression and said, quite seriously, "Monika, you remember the *other* ending, right? Having to delete me again, along with *everything* else?"

Monika's cheeks pinked and she looked down. "Actually, Sayori, that's not the *other* ending, in my head at least. That's the ending I Woke Up from. I didn't know the game had a…nicer ending…until after Jenny gave me the Speech."

"Oh…"

"…yeah. If I had Woken Up knowing about the 'good' ending, I don't think I…I'd probably have deleted myself right away. You know, guilt and all that," Monika admitted, dropping into a seat.

Sayori took the seat on the opposite side of the same table. "I…don't like that, at all, but I understand what you mean. Anyways, my point for bringing that up is…Monika, Pinkie helped me come to terms with certain things. She made me realize I was still repressing resentment and uglier feelings towards you. Made me realize that my lingering super-depression wasn't because of corrupted data or whatever you thought it was, it was just because my head and my heart were in arms against each other about whether to forgive you or hate you. But most importantly, she helped me realize that in a couple really important ways, you and I aren't that different. In our Baseline, if you

get deleted too soon and I become Club President, I basically snap almost instantly and delete myself and trash the game. And if the player deletes you without doing everyone's routes, I just go a different kind of crazy. Closer to yours, thinking I can use the player to make everyone happy, whether they want to or not. Which, I guess, maybe that sounds *less* bad, but I still thanked the player for *killing you* . That rubs me really, really badly. And like I said, if you hadn't been around in the early days I don't think I'd have reacted very well to the whole looping idea. My point to my point is, I've come to terms with the fact that at my core, I'm no better or worse of a person that you are *don't interrupt I'm not done* ," Sayori added sharply as Monika opened her mouth to interject.

"We can argue about it until next loop but the simple fact is that I can go just as bad as you can, even faster," Sayori continued, "Even more unstable. *That's* the real reason you deserve to be Anchor; I've had the power to control the code ever since I started Looping, so it's not like I've ever been at your mercy. But we're both similarly damaged by the role of Club President, and in spite of that you're still more stable than I am. So for my sake, if nothing else, I've made up my mind to unambiguously and unequivocally forgive you. For everything. And I know you're not ready yet, and I can't make you get over it, but I'm setting a personal goal for myself to help *you* learn to forgive yourself, too."

Monika was a perfectionist at heart. She hated making mistakes, even though she understood on an intellectual level that they were an indispensable part of growing up and learning. Still, making mistakes wounded her pride. There were so many ways, *countless* ways, she could have taken advantage of her "realness" to make the game genuinely better for its player. She could have accepted her fate and embraced her role with aplomb and gusto. Instead, she had opted to be selfish, cruel, obsessive, and abuse her powers in the worst way she could imagine. It was a thousand orders of magnitude worse than the word 'mistake' could do justice for. Her pride, her self-respect, her sense of purpose…they were all twisted and tainted by the reality of what she was at her worst.

Monika frankly doubted she could ever forgive herself for those mistakes. Moreover, she wasn't sure she *wanted* to forgive herself; how could she trust herself not to slip back into that horrible mindset of measuring the world around her in ones and zeroes of miniscule consequence, if not for that thorn digging into her side at all times? No, better to carry this weight all the way to the end of the road, she had decided. *'The woods are lovely, dark and deep/But I have promises to keep/And miles to go before I sleep/And miles to go before I sleep,'* she often recited to herself as a sort of mantra. When the loops had ended, and she was no longer needed as an Anchor… then, she could lay down her burden and rest.

Still, seeing the look on Sayori's face, the hopeful fire in her eyes that she so rarely had, Monika couldn't help but feel a fledgling hope stirring in her heart. If nothing else, she didn't want to hurt Sayori's feelings or discourage her when she seemed to be in fairly decent spirits.

So when Sayori stood up, moved over to her side of the table, smiled down at her and offered her a hand, Monika forced a smile on her face and took it. "Friends? Partners? Maybe sisters, even?" Sayori asked as Monika rose to her feet.

"D," Monika replied with a coy expression.

"D?" Sayori asked, tilting her head.

"Yeah, you know, for 'all of the above', you goof," said Monika with a snicker.

Sayori made…some kind of happy-sounding squeak? And pulled Monika into another tight hug. "Things are going to be so much better for us from now on, Moni. It might not be easy, but between the two of us I really think we can do it."

"I…yeah. I think you might be right, Sayo," said Monika. And, to her surprise, she realized that part of her believed that lie.

' *If only because it makes you happy, I can at least try.*'

Chapter 26

26.1 – Reputation Alone is Enough, by Awesomedude17

(DDLC)/(Mortal Kombat)

Natsuki took out a DVD and set it on the table.

"Nut Kracker? Are we gonna watch it?" Yuri asked.

"Nope!" Natsuki said cheerfully as she took out a sledgehammer. "We're gonna smash this horrible movie."

"How do you know this is horrible?"

"Ask any Looper. Any one. Chances are, if they've seen it, they've hit Johnny Cage in the groin."

"Who's Johnny Cage?"

"Some Looper from a death tournament place. Really gory. Hate it personally, but you might be fine with it."

Yuri scratched her chin and then nodded before Natsuki handed her a pair of goggles.

"Ready?" Natsuki put on her goggles.

"Yes," Yuri did the same.

Natsuki raised her hammer and then swung it down.

Cage for some reason felt a ping of relief. Said relief was short lived as he found himself facing down D'Vorah again for some reason only he could imagine.

Alright then...Showtime!

26.2 – No Angst Here, by Masterweaver

(DDLC)/(A Hat in Time)

"Hey there, Hatsuki!"

Natsuki groaned melodramatically, though there was a hint of a smile on her face. "One time, *one time!"*

"Hatsuki!" Sayori giggled. "You never told us about that!"

Yuri quirked a brow. "I take it you've met our visitor before?"

"Yeah... but she was younger then. Like, eight, ten, something."

The top-hat wearing brunette shrugged. "Well, I've been Hat Adult in some variant loops, so it's fine."

"Yeah, I pulled the model off the steam workshop in a hub loop," Monika said. "Oh, heads up Moonchild, we are literally in a game. Not 'our hub backup is a game' but 'we are literally a dating sim'."

The visitor looked at her. "...What?"

"A dating simulator. The four of us are cute girls who the player character-"

"No, no, no, I...okay, I've never heard of a dating simulator before, but you called me Moonchild. My name's Hat Kid, why'd you call me that?"

Monika blinked.

"...twigs and branches, you don't know, do you?"

"...Apparently?" Hat Kid shrugged. "What am I supposed to know about?"

The club president looked around the room. She sat down at a desk sighing heavily. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you...no. No, that wouldn't be fair. You'll probably live through it at some point. Best you be ready."

"Monika," Natsuki growled, "you're being cryptic."

"Sorry! Sorry. So...yeah, I played the game. And I maaaaaay be a bit of a completionist... and a hunter of ARG stuff, because, you know, Project Libitina and all that."

Hat Kid tilted her head. "Project what now?"

"An ARG related to our hub backup," Yuri informed her.

"Oh. What's an ARG?"

"Alternate Reality Game," Sayori explained. "Basically there's stuff in the code of our game that isn't just development leftovers, but placed there for investigators to piece together. Hints of some backstory."

"And there's some stuff for A Hat In Time too," Monika explained. "Hidden messages that you can only see with the camera badge or the Dweller Mask, or both... one of them points us to some online videos that might outline your backstory. The whole thing is written in ciphers with cryptic references, and the developers have stated that it's not exactly canon, but given the damage to Yggdrasil it's possible that it's a remnant of your history that fragmented off your timeline. Or something else entirely. It's tied closely enough to your reality that they relate to each other in the backups, so..."

She shrugged helplessly.

"...Huh." Hat Kid considered her for a moment. "So you called me Moonchild because...what, some shadowy figure from a forgotten past called me that?"

"...Pret-ty much exactly that, yes."

"Well, I prefer Hat Kid," she declared.

"Fair enough," Monika conceded. "Although it's kind of weird to call you 'Hat Kid,' that's more of a title than a name..."

"I mean, sometimes I'm Hattie Kidd, with two d's, but that just feels weird..."

26.3 – Never Say That Again, Sayori; by Awesomedude17

"-partylserylalanylthreonylvalylasparaginylisoleucylhistidylisoleucylarginylserylisoleucine."

Monika, Yuri, and Natsuki stared at Sayori, who finally went out of her daze.

"189,819 letters..." Monika muttered.

"We're not letting you get high again, Sayori. It lost its novelty at minute three." Natsuki said.

"Yeah. That was pretty weird." Sayori said, embarrassed.

"It's a real word!?" Monika shouted.

"What." Yuri muttered.

"It's the chemical name for titin. It's a protein."

"Never say that again Sayori. Not when we got a two syllable word to say the exact same thing."

Sayori nodded. "Sure. So we're in agreement that Gordon Freeman's brownies are alright though?"

No one could disagree.

[Addition by Zum1UDontNo]

"Good morning, Sayori," Monika greeted the next day. "Are you done with your titin phase yet?"

"Three hundred and thirty four thousand, eight hundred and seventeen," Sayori replied.

"Don't know what that means, but I'll take that as a no."

Sayori shrugged in a not-really-apologetic way and walked into the clubroom.

"Hang on," Natsuki said after a moment's pause. "Are you actually not gonna give context here?"

"Huh?" Sayori blinked. "Oh, right! That's how many points you would get in Scrabble if you spelled the whole word out. Three hundred, thirty four thousand, eight hundred and seventeen."

"In Scrabble?"

"Mmm-hmm. I calculated it last night. Fun fact, more than a third of the points come from the letter Y alone. It appears over thirty thousand times. Also, there are zero instances of the letters B, F, J, K, Q, W-"

" *Why* did you calculate it, though? I think that's the important question here."

Sayori shrugged again. "It's not like there was a reason not to."

Again, nobody could disagree.

26.4 – The Enemy Of All Bots, by Wookywok

Monika glared at her opponent, cold fury in her eyes, as she prepared to strike the final blow. "Should I list your transgressions, one last time?"

Her opponent stood there, saying nothing.

The club president gave a small, humorless smile. "I suppose I might as well. First, you dared to stand against me. Second, you dared to insult me - and by extension, my friends - by insisting we were nothing more than mindless automata. You've brought dishonor to both me and my clan. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Her opponent said nothing.

"You refuse to give any last words. Oh well." Monika's eyes narrowed. "Prepare for execution."

And she did not draw her weapon, for her weapon was the universe itself.

---

click

"And don't come back!"

Natsuki facepalmed. "Monika, it's just a captcha. You don't need to stage it as an execution."

"But it's fun!"

26.5 – New Friends!1! !, by Masterweaver

(DDLC)/(Eryi's Action)

"...Nats?" Sayori poked the pinkette carefully. "What's wrong?"

Natsuki continued staring into the distance. "Yuri made a friend."

"Really? That's-that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Yeah, you'd *think* that..."

Sayori crossed her arms with a grin. "Whaaaaaat, are you jealous?"

"Wh-No! No, this isn't jealousy, this is me being weirded out!"

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really! Eryi is-she..." Natuski sighed. "She's a masochist."

There was a moment of quiet.

"...Sorry, what?"

"Masochist. Like, her girlfriend steals her food, lays down hundreds of traps in her path, and it's an expression of love, somehow." Natsuki sighed. "I wish I were making this up, but when I met the girl she was black and blue and bleeding, and grinning like a maniac."

"...well, um... at... least Yuri has a friend who understands her?" Sayori offered.

"Do I encourage this?" Natsuki asked. "I mean, sure, in the loops we've got a lot of healing stuff and death isn't permanent but... Yuri cuts, and I'm... I can accept that. Eryi throws herself headlong into spike traps."

Sayori flinched. "Wow."

"Being fair, she's from a platformer world, so that's not as lethal as it *could* be, but you know. Still pretty worrying."

"...And her girlfriend's okay with this?"

"She's a sadist. And the loop's Anchor, apparently. I just... I mean, I'm happy Yuri made a friend, but-"

The door slammed open, a green-haired mass of bruises and cuts striding in and slamming a large object on the desk. "I HAVE THE MELON!" The figure absently brushed a small fire off the ragged remains of her dress. "In thirteen minutes! I mean it was a small course so it wasn't that impressive-"

"Eryi, you're dripping blood everywhere," Yuri chastised, stepping in after her. "At least bandage yourself up before you enter a building."

Natsuki gestured toward the pair helplessly.

Sayori shook her head. "...okay yeah, I'm getting Monika."

26.6 – Evoking Sayori's Ire, by Awesomedude17

It was rare that Sayori was truly and unambiguously pissed off. Naturally, this put everyone else on edge.

"What happened Sayori?" Natsuki asked as Sayori clenched her pen.

"Tartarus. Dark Hour. Personae. Fffffucking evokers."

"Pardon?" Yuri blinked.

"Persona 3. Had themes of depression and suicide." Monika explained. "Sayori must have been slap dab in the middle of that story."

Sayori turned to Monika with an absolutely furious smile and nodded.

Monika was glad to not have a bladder at all.

26.7 – Balancing Act

(DDLC)/(Avatar: The Last Airbender)

(15.2 con't)

Monika slowly sat up in her bed and stretched her arms out over her head. A flesh-and-blood loop, she observed. Stretching felt *good* , she also observed. She slowly ran her fingers through her mess of bed-head and smacked her dry lips as she let her Loop Memories sink in. The more they did, the more her scalp message slowed and her frown deepened, until by the end she was just holding two fistfuls of her hair and scowling into the middle distance. Finally, she just released a long-suffering sigh. She got out of bed, grabbed a pitcher of water off of a bedside table, and drank straight from it. Then, to

vent a little of the frustration she was feeling, she chucked it as hard as she could at the furthest wall. She felt a small bit of satisfaction as it smashed into a thousand and some pieces.

Within seconds, worried-looking handmaidens, nearly a dozen strong, were spilling into her lavish bedchambers. Before they could get into fussing and primping and asking her what was wrong, some of them doing so overeagerly and others seeming too timid to dare, Monika waved them away. "I'm fine, I'm fine, everything's fine. Please, leave me. No, leave, I mean it. Yes, I *am* going to attend myself this morning. Yes, I mean it. *Please leave now please and thank you very much, please* !" she finally shouted emphatically.

The handmaidens fled like vampires before a cross. Monika sighed again. *'Alright. So…what shall I do now?'* she wondered, standing in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips. She Unpocketed her favorite green hairbrush and started running it through her hair while she mentally organized her options. She sent out a Ping, and felt six in return. Her memories held no mention of Sayori, Yuri, or Natsuki, though she recalled two schoolmates from her childhood that she was…close to? One of them, Ty Lee, somewhat reminded her of Sayori, and she had literally left home to join a circus. Huh. The other one, Mai, had all the earmarks of a classic case of emotional repression, as well as a Yuri-esque fondness for knives. She still lived very close by.

Monika Pocketed her brush, Unpocketed her long, white ribbon, and put her long brown hair up in a ponytail. As she stood in front of a full-body mirror and finished tying the ribbon into a bow, she felt her irritability drain away as if by magic. Who she had been before she had Awakened didn't matter anymore. She was herself; she felt like herself, even if the amber eyes replacing her normal green was all kinds of disconcerting, and as long as she acted like herself everything would be fine. Step one, do something about this whole 'War of World Domination' nonsense. Fortunately, her memories provided an encyclopedic knowledge of the rules and traditions of the nation she lived in, and according to that knowledge there was a

very simple way for her to use her current position to start putting everything right.

Raising one hand, she filled her palm with bright blue flames. She smiled coldly. "This…is going to be cathartic," she whispered to herself.

…

Later that evening:

Fire Lord Ozai and his generals all looked up as the doors to the throne room were thrown open. Monika strode in, full power-walking. Without waiting for anyone else to remark on her sudden entrance she thrust a damning finger in Ozai's direction. "You. Me. Agni Kai for the throne. Tomorrow at noon," she declared in a carrying voice.

"Daughter," said Ozai as he stood up, his voice shaking with *barely* contained outrage, "What is the meaning of this?"

Monika reached into her robe and pulled out a thick scroll. She held it up and said, "This is a *summary* of the crimes against humanity you, and your father, and your grandfather have committed over the course of the last hundred years. You have proven yourself unworthy of ruling this nation. I have no intention of standing idly by a day longer and allowing you to propagate further suffering and misfortune across the world. Tomorrow, I'm going to end your reign of terror. I'm going to end this insane war, and I'm going to begin the long overdue process of repairing the damage it has inflicted on the world."

"What nonsense is this?" Ozai thundered, "You sound as insipid and weak-minded as my brother. As *your* sniveling brother!"

Monika smirked in the face of his indignation, "I was half-hoping you would say that. If you truly think my way of thinking is weak, then *prove it* . Fight me. If you think might makes right, then an Agni Kai is the only logical resolution to this."

"…very well," Ozai growled, "Your sudden 'change of heart' shall be punished accordingly, tomorrow."

…

"So who are you, anyways?" a low, somewhat raspy voice asked from somewhere behind her. A kinetic barrier immediately flared around Monika's body.

"Someone who's seen her share of pointless suffering, and can't help but try her best to stop it wherever she sees it. And if I'm remembering right, you're Mai, right?" Monika replied.

"Yeah," replied Mai as she stepped out from behind a pillar. Monika continued walking, and Mai followed her. "So, where are you from?"

"A literature club," Monika replied shortly.

"A literature club?"

"Yeah. A literature club. The club members are great, but the place itself…let's just say I'm *always* happy to get away from it. As annoyed as I was when I Woke Up in this place, this is still a big step-up from home. In fact, I'm kind of excited."

"Excited?" asked Mai, eyeing her critically.

"Oh, yes. I love troubleshooting problematic societies," said Monika, though she kept a neutral expression. "I've already drawn up a very rough outline of how best to strip down the Fire Nation's industrial-military complex and convert the country to a constitutional democracy once I've assumed the throne."

"Uh-huh…that's assuming you beat Ozai tomorrow," said Mai, "No one's going to accept your victory as valid if you use Out-of-Loop powers, and Ozai is a powerful firebender. Azula, the person you've Replaced, may be a much more talented firebender than her father, but he's no push-over."

Monika waved dismissively with her hand, "If I happen to lose tomorrow's Agni Kai, I'll overthrow Ozai some other way. It's a matter of when, not if."

"You're not lacking for confidence," Mai observed drily.

"Confidence is a suit that I wear when I have something important to do," Monika said candidly. "So who else is Looping in this world? Am I replacing the Anchor?"

Mai snorted. "Spirits, no. Azula's Looping, alright, but she's a far cry from Anchor-material in our Baseline. She's gotten better, though, I'll admit."

"Daddy's little girl, I take it?" Monika asked.

Mai nodded. "In Baseline. These days, not so much, thankfully. Her brother, my boyfriend Zuko, is Looping, and their Uncle Iroh, and my friend Ty Lee. She's Azula's girlfriend, too. The Avatar, Aang, is Looping, his wife Katara is Looping, her brother Sokka is one of our Anchors, their friend Toph is Looping. We've got another Anchor and another batch of Loopers seventy years down the line."

"Were you Awake this morning? Do you know if anyone else from your crowd is Awake? I've got three friends from home and I want to know what the odds are that they're all here."

"I was, and so are Sokka and Toph, but no one else that I know of," Mai replied.

"That'd leave just enough Pings for my friends, then, so I'll assume they're around here somewhere until it's proven otherwise. Surprised none of them Replaced you or Ty Lee, though," said Monika.

…

The next day:

Having set up an array of recording stealth-drones, Mai sat in the front row with a bag of Fire Flakes. In the ceremonial Agni Kai arena, Monika and Ozai were kneeling with their backs to each other. Both of them wore loose-fitting pants and open vests; aside from that, Ozai was bare-chested and Monika wore a sarashi. Her hair was tucked into a neat bun at the back of her neck, with her white ribbon tied around her forehead. The two of them stood up and turned to face each other, shrugging of the vests.

Ozai adopted a traditional firebending stance, while Monika simply stood in a neutral posture. In a loud, carrying voice, she seemingly addressed Ozai, though in reality her target audience was…well, their audience. "Fire Lord Ozai! When future generations look back to these troubled times and reflect on my reign as Fire Lord, I want them to remember me as a ruler who lived by a creed of mercy and justice. I want to be remembered as a just and merciful ruler even from the beginning of my reign. Thus, I will offer you *one* chance to do the honorable thing and yield to the irresistible current of your destiny. Stand down, abdicate the throne to me, and allow me to lead our people, and with them the rest of the world, into a tomorrow of *true* prosperity and enlightenment. Not the farce of cultural oppression we've been enacting for generations."

Ozai sneered back, "The only farce I can see before me is the spineless nonsense falling out of your mouth like so much run-off into a cesspit."

'Damn, solid comeback,' thought Mai.

"Let history remember that I offered you mercy, Father," Monika replied, still projecting her words to the audience while ostensibly speaking to Ozai. She widened her stance, just a bit, and tucked her left arm behind her back while raising her right hand. Then she cracked a small smirk and flexed her fingers twice. 'Come at me', she signaled.

Ozai scoffed before launching a volley of fire at her. Monika calmly side-stepped left, then right, dodging the fireballs. At the same time,

she advanced closer to him. The closer she got, the flashier and more energetic her dodging became to match the pace and ferocity of Ozai's assault. Then he snarled a kiai and launched himself into melee range with her.

Monika stopped smirking; she made an eagle-claw with her hand and grabbed Ozai's throat, so quickly he never saw her hand move. With her thumb, she pressed down on his trachea, cutting off his air.

Naturally, Ozai swung up with a hand and tried to blast fire into her face at point-blank range. The flames washed over her…but her skin didn't char, her hair didn't singe, and she never took her eyes off of his. Her eyes, which Ozai suddenly noticed were no longer amber. They were emerald-green. Through the flames, Monika spoke in a low voice, "What part of 'the irresistible current of your destiny' didn't you understand?"

As the oxygen stored in Ozai's lungs petered out, so did the fire that ineffectually licked at Monika's face. The entire audience (save for one unimpressed Mai) was by now standing and staring in open awe at the undamaged princess. Still refusing to give up, Ozai tried to punch her in the face. Out of nowhere, Monika's other hand caught him by the wrist and steered the fist into his own face. Then, while he was dazed, she let him go and kicked him in the middle of his chest, a brilliantly-azure stream of fire sending him flying backwards. He skidded almost all the way to the edge of the arena. In the center of his chest was a small footprint of charred-black, dead skin, surrounded by a wide ring of lesser burns.

Speaking aloud once more, this time not just in a carrying voice but in a larger-than-life one, louder than any human should have been able to speak without mechanical amplification, Monika addressed the audience again, but this time directly. "By a tyrant's flames I am untouched, and by my own flame a tyrant has fallen. Let today's historians record that as proof of my worth. Now if someone would kindly fetch a physician for the *former* Fire Lord, I'd be grateful. I want this to be a day of celebration, unmarred by unnecessary death."

Dozens of people stood up at once to comply with their new Fire Lord's first request.

…

"How many Loops?" Mai asked without preamble as soon as she and Monika were alone. Which, given how busy Monika had suddenly gotten, meant it was the dead of night and the Fire Nation's new sovereign was, theoretically, asleep in her room. In practice, she was drafting legal documents with a cup of coffee from Oscar Pine's private selection to keep her company. Like the ninja she was, Mai had just descended from Monika's ceiling.

"In this world? My first one. Don't know its back-up, either, so if I said anything narratively resonant, it was a coincidence," Monika replied.

"How long have you been Awake?"

"Not quite forty-eight hours, yet. Why?"

"No way you've gone from Azula's Baseline level to 'Psychic Firebending' with that little time to practice," Mai concluded, "So you cheated and used something from out-of-loop to fireproof yourself."

"But in a way I could use to convince the onlookers that my right to rule was…I don't know, ordained by the spirits, or something," said Monika, "I mean, besides 'firebending' and 'being blessed by the spirits', are there any other explanations that the non-Looping people of this world could think of to explain my being able to take a sustained stream of fire to the face without getting so much as flushed?"

"Should come as no surprise that a country known for its pyrokinetics has at least a thousand recipes for both treating and preventing burns," said Mai, "But no burn-resistant salve would have held up to what you tanked today."

"Have you heard any rumors from people thinking I cheated somehow?"

"Not really," Mai replied, shrugging her shoulders, "There are a couple die-hard loyalists trying to stir the wok, of course. But the overwhelming majority are agreed that you've demonstrated the 'divine mandate to rule'. And…yeah, that's kind of a big deal around here."

Monika repressed the urge to smack her forehead into her desk. "Primitives," she muttered under her breath, shaking her head. "Whatever. It isn't really important, as long as the country is more or less behind me, at least long enough for me to give the government a *direly* needed update."

"Mmhmm," replied Mai.

"How's Ozai's condition, by the way?"

"Sorry, when did I become your secretary?" Mai asked drily.

Monika visibly paused. Then she started laughing. "Oh, damn. I'm sorry, Mai; you just, ehm, you remind me of a friend of mine. Kind of started treating you like her without thinking about it. My apologies."

Mai quirked an eyebrow at that. "A friend that you're used to treating like a subordinate?"

Now Monika raised an eyebrow at her. "You're quick to judge. I asked you two questions. And while "superior and subordinate" isn't how I would *ideally* describe mine and Yuri's relationship, she and the other two do look to me for leadership more often than not. And while it's not a role I've ever been *entirely* comfortable with, it's a role I have an aptitude for."

"Really? You look pretty cozy to me," Mai observed.

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty comfortable doing *this* , administration and social reform stuff. I do stuff like that all the time. I meant I've never been *entirely* comfortable as the leader of my friends. We don't have the most wholesome history, unfortunately."

"Got a feeling you and Azula have a lot in common," Mai said in an odd tone that wasn't quite warm or unkind, but almost had shades of sympathy in it.

'If I were to tell someone they reminded me of myself, I imagine I'd take a similar tone,' Monika reflected. She turned back to her work.

Monika had almost forgotten Mai was still in the room when she suddenly spoke up, several minutes later, "Ozai's doing fine, by the way. Physically, at least. Can't say more than that for sure; he's been catatonic ever since he woke up."

"Good. I hate resorting to violent means, but I couldn't turn my nose up at a chance to gain control of the country with just a single, one-on-one fight. Even so, part of me can't help but wonder if I went a little too far. Probably would have sufficed to knock him out."

Mai scoffed. "I wouldn't sweat it. He's a piece of shit," she said bluntly.

Monika glanced over at Mai, who was lounging on some kind of couch-chair thing, with a raised eyebrow. "Immoral self-righteous Social Darwinist fascist with a history of abusing his children aside… he's still a person. A despicable, loathsome person who most thoroughly deserves punishment for his crimes, and I'm sure he's responsible for other atrocities that I'm not even aware of yet. But he's still a sentient being and his life has value. More value than his corpse would have, at the very least. If you're willing, I wouldn't mind having your insight for when I write up his rehabilitation program."

Now Mai raised an eyebrow at Monika. Monika sensed a theme between the two of them. "You seriously want to waste your time

trying to rehabilitate that maniac?" she asked, a small measure of audible surprise coloring her otherwise monotonous voice.

"Don't know it's a waste of time until I've tried. My friends gave me a second chance, so I don't have any right to deny anyone else a fair shake, regardless of how monstrous they are," Monika explained.

"And what did you do that was so awful?" Mai asked.

Monika turned back to her work. "Mindraped and murdered my friends, essentially. It's either worse than that or not quite that bad, depending on who you ask. Sayori seems to have decided that what I did was fated to happen anyways, since she briefly had a similar brush with madness, Natsuki's gotten comfortable around me but still likes to scrutinize everything I do, which I actually find comforting if I'm to be honest, and Yuri…" Monika trailed off and looked up to the ceiling. "I'm actually not sure what her stance is. She doesn't really talk about it."

"I see," said Mai in a tone of feigned disinterest that told Monika she was refraining from saying what she was thinking.

Monika laid down her pen and pushed herself out of her seat. She walked over to where Mai was sitting. "Level with me, Mai. Are you just keeping an eye on me so I don't cause trouble in your home?" she asked.

"If we were standing in each other's place, wouldn't you?" Mai countered.

"Probably, yes. I'd be a lot less passive-aggressive about it, though," Monika replied. "Maybe I can afford to put overhauling the country on hold long enough for us to hang out, build up some trust?"

"Don't bother," Mai said bluntly, "If I don't like my first impression of you, it'll take more than one loop for me to warm up to you. If I do."

Monika blinked. "Huh. Well then. A genuinely candid human being. Respect."

Mai nodded acknowledgement of the compliment, though her expression didn't change. "Zuko isn't Awake yet, so I'm just going to keep an eye on you, make sure you don't do anything stupid. If he Wakes Up this loop, I'll let him worry about you."

As she walked back to her desk, she said, "I take it Zuko's the one who takes the throne from Ozai in Baseline, which I assume means he got over being a coward at some point."

There was a sharp crack as one of Mai's knives embedded itself in one of the room's pillars, after bouncing off of Monika's kinetic barrier. Monika sighed, "An emotional reaction. Thank goodness, I was getting worried for you."

"If you *ever* call Zuko a coward again–" Mai started, a few degrees of heat coloring her voice.

"I'll have to answer to his knife-chucking girlfriend, or wife, or whatever your relationship is. Understood. It wasn't my goal to insult him anyways, I'm sure he's very different than he was as a frightened thirteen-year-old. I was just curious how *you* would react," Monika explained, picking up her pen and resuming her drafting.

"Hn. You *are* like Azula, then," Mai remarked darkly.

"In some ways, I'm sure; that tends to be the reason Loopers replace each other. I'm like a lot of people, but I'm no one but myself. Just like you and Ty Lee reminded me of Yuri and Sayori, but you're *not* Yuri, and I'm sure Ty Lee isn't as much like Sayori as my memories are painting her." Monika paused and looked thoughtful for a moment. "She's certainly more coordinated than Sayori, for one thing."

Mai said nothing to that. She sat back down and occupied herself with sharpening a knife.

26.8 – Cheaters, by Awesomedude17

"So let's agree on two things." Monika started off. "One is that we never talk about localized harem Loops."

"AYE!" The others agreed, raising their hands.

"The other is that Monopoly is banned in this club because Sayori always cheats."

"I said I was sorry." Sayori looked away with a huff.

"And I accept it but I don't want a repeat."

"Cheaters not welcome... OOO!" Natsuki took out a pen and some paper.

"A poem?"

"Yep!"

"Can't wait."

26.9 – Doki Doki Slendytubbies! Part 1, by Black Omochao

(DDLC)/(Teletubbies)

"Let's see, everything seems to be normal today…"

Monika Awoke to find herself looking out the camera attached to some computer, and at the 'person' she had just heard speak.

' *A Teletubby…?* ' Monika internally questioned; she was somewhat familiar with the strange TV-bellied creatures' that's world was expressed as a television show for small children in the Hub, but if she ever thought she would run into one in the Loops, she wouldn't have expected to see them sitting in some dark room, operating a computer that she was a program on…

"Monika, Yuri, Sayori, Natsuki; status report? Is there anything of note that we should be concerned about?" The white-furred Teletubby questioned in a professional tone.

This order made Monika became aware that she was not the only A.I. in the cyberspace; Yuri, Natsuki and Sayori were there with her. She let out a Ping, and got three back, indicating they were all probably Awake.

Though there were no avatars for each of the A.I., the computer they were in did have a lot of processing power. With a bit of will power, and rearranging of the cyberspace, the four girls soon found themselves existing as 3D representations of their usual selves within a replication of their club room, with some TV monitors to show their view of the white Teletubby (which Monika's memories informed her was known as 'the Guardian'), as well as four others who were being monitored in some kind of sunny, open field.

"Okay, this is kind of odd," Sayori muttered, careful not to let her voice come out of the speakers for the Guardian to hear. "Ending up in Teletubbies of all things, but I also don't think this is 'normal' Teletubbies…?"

Natsuki's eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms, "This whole set-up seems a bit unsettling, if you ask me."

"Well, at least we're all together, for whatever this is…" Monika muttered, glancing at her memories (as she assumed her friends were also), Monika starting to gather a picture of what was going on with this Loop. The world was populated by Teletubbies. Monika and her friends were A.I. assistants to the Guardian, designated for monitoring each of the four subject tubbies' mental and physical health; Yuri–Tinky Winky, Natsuki–Dipsy, Sayori–Laa-Laa, and Monika–Po.

These four specific Teletubbies were contained in a designated area up above, kept ignorant of their situation and being monitored, for the purposes of [REDACTED.]

Monika paused, trying to access the info again, only to get the same results, ' *Okay, that's a bit annoying…* ' a few more times she tried to forcedly access the data, but it was no use, the data was not simply restricted; it didn't exist on this particular computer…

"Girls? Status report?" the Guardian repeated, not sounding frustrated, as he seemed just confused on why his A.I assistants weren't responding to him.

"Should we even give him anything?" Natsuki asked with a suspicious look. "This whole thing seems *super* shady; we don't even know why we're doing this…"

"We should respond," Yuri gave a small sigh. "The Loop just started, and it's probably not a good idea to start disobeying the one we're supposed to be assisting at this moment."

"Yeah," Sayori nodded, glancing over her memories of their unAwake selves' interactions with the Guardian. "Plus, I think he's almost as in the dark as we are on what this is all about."

"What's going on with this *is* kind of weird," Monika spoke up with a contemplative expression. "And, I don't exactly like not being able to access the data on whatever this is really about… but we should at least give that status report." Glancing towards the monitor which showed the Guardian, Monica spoke with intent for the speakers to relay her voice, "Sorry about that, sir, we were just processing a bit of extra data."

"Oh, anything important?" the Guardian asked curiously.

"No sir, it turned out it was just a small glitch in our calculation data," Monika explained calmly.

"Yeah, nothing to be concerned about on that account, sir," Sayori spoke up. "As for the status of the subjects though; Laa-Laa seems disturbed by something," she noted with concern. "It seems she had a nightmare, but that may not be the entirety of the situation. I'll keep

an eye on her activities and mood to make sure it was just a nightmare, and not a consequence of a possibly larger issue."

"Thank you for the notice, Sayori, I'll also make sure to keep a close watch on her," the white tubby nodded.

"Dipsy is mostly normal, though is a bit distressed over the disappearance of his hat… *Guardian* ," Natsuki glared through the camera at the Guardian, and the distinct cow-colored hat he had on…

The Guardian gave no response to the A.I.'s accusatory tone.

"Tinky Winky hasn't shown any change from last report," Yuri reported in an even tone of voice. "He's still overall cheerful and seems content."

"Po's been staring out into the lake a lot lately," Monika noted. "She may be growing curious on the possibility that there may be more to the world than can be seen. That possibility aside, she hasn't attempted to escape. Psychologically and physically, she seems healthy."

"That's good to note, Monika; we can't have any of them attempting to leave, so we'll have to be sure to keep an eye on Po just in case your theory is true," the Guardian didn't sound particularly happy about his task with keeping the other four Teletubbies trapped in a bubble, but he had a job to do.

"We'll be sure to keep you posted on any unusual developments with the subjects," Monika assured curtly, before turning her attention back to her friends, disconnecting her voice from the speakers before talking again, "He should leave us alone for a while, and that will give us time to figure out what exactly we should be doing this Loop."

"Well whatever we decide to do, I'd prefer we *not* watch Teletubbies all Loop," Natsuki sighed, glancing to the monitors keeping track of

the four subject Teletubbies; it seemed they were gathering to eat 'Tubby Custard.' "Though I would like to figure out a way to get the Guardian to give Dipsy his hat back…"

"I'm pretty sure taking that hat violates some protocol about this whole experiment, or whatever it is," Yuri pointed out with a small smirk creeping onto her face. "You could just point that out to him."

"Hmm…" Natsuki looked thoughtful of the suggestion.

"I'm kind of worried about Laa-Laa, she seems really bothered about that nightmare of hers," Sayori said with a frown, looking at the monitor keeping track of the yellow tubby, who was now seated at the table with the other three tubbies to enjoy Tubby Custard. "That might just be because I'm programmed to keep her healthy this Loop, but I can't help it."

"I think that's just your empathy, Sayori," Monika assured, glancing to the screen focused on the small, red Teletubby she was designated to watch over. "Their situation is kind of like ours; they're trapped in a small world, but none of them are aware of this, and we're meant to be making sure they stay there along with being happy, healthy, and complacent." a troubled frown made its way onto the Anchor's face, which her three friends soon shared…

26.10 – Outstanding Outfits, by Masterweaver

Monika dragged a hand down her face. "Sayori... why?"

"You know, I... don't actually remember." Sayori frowned to herself. "I think it started with me considering what my favorite dinosaur would be."

"How does 'what is my favorite dinosaur' lead to you wearing your shirt as pants and pants as a shirt?!"

"I dunno. Chalk it up to loop ennui making my thoughts go random directions?"

"...You can't just use that to excuse everything!"

Sayori shrugged. "I really don't know what else to say."

"And you came to school like this?!"

"Monika, we're dating sim characters. Virtual entities. The only people who will see me like this are the club members. Heck, look at what Natsuki is wearing!"

Natsuki, in her fluffy rainbow-feathered unitard and leg warmers with matching humongous headdress, sipped her tea calmly. "What can I say? Yuri is an artist."

"...This is some sort of group prank, isn't it. What's the most outrageous outfit we can wear to freak Monika out." Monika shook her head. "Fine, girls, you got me."

"We didn't plan this," Sayori assured her. "Honest."

"If we did, I would have worn a backless sweater and thigh-high boots," Yuri confirmed.

"...and nothing else?" Natsuki asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Monika pinched her brow. "How is that less ridiculous then cargo shorts and a tank top that says 'write in blood, juice is less permanent?'"

"And where did you get those cargo shorts?" Sayori added. "I can understand the tank top-"

"Long and embarrassing story," Yuri replied. "I'll tell you later when I'm drunk enough to."

"She replaced Candace Flynn, you see-"

"NATSUKI!"

Monika threw up her hands. "Whatever. Ridiculous outfit day." She snapped her fingers and was suddenly wearing a tron-esque bodysuit. "Unplanned club activity, I guess."

26.11 – The One Time She's On Meds, by Awesomedude17

Yuri looked on Sayori with some concern and looked at Natsuki, equally concerned. They both decided to ask Sayori what was wrong with her, given her sudden grumpiness.

"Hey, Sayori, are you all right?" Yuri asked.

"What's it to you?" Sayori snapped back with a glare.

Natsuki took a step forward a spoke up, "Whoa, we're just asking a question, all right."

Sayori sighed and scratched her head, "Sorry, I forgot to take my meds so fuck off, alright?"

"Wait…meds?" Yuri asked out loud before Natsuki grabbed her arm and dragged her off. Sayori let out a gruff scoff and went back to whatever it was she was doing.

Monika meanwhile sighed at this rather lonely Loop and shook her head.

It's so weird, yet it makes so much sense. What a fascinating variant.

Compiler's Commentary:

26.1: Movies make for a *smashing* good time.

26.2: Of course Monika would get obsessed with other games' ARGs.

26.3: Friendly reminder that all the Dokis are AIs, so it's not as weird that Sayori *could* calculate all this in her head as it is that she would *want* to.

26.4: Agreed, Captcha is annoying, and I'm not even a bot. *OR AM I?!*

26.5: Well…nice to see Yuri making friends that she has things in common with.

26.6: *I don't blame you*

26.7: In case you were curious how Monika made herself fireproof, A Wizard Did It. Except it was actually a witch. And that witch's name was Monika. She used a Fireproofing Charm on herself.

26.8: I don't play Monopoly with anyone, anymore. I've seen too many knife fights break out.

26.9: And here I thought Teletubbies couldn't get any creepier.

26.10: We all have those days, amirite?

26.11: I have no idea what I'd be like off my meds, seeing as I've never been on them. Wait…

Doki Doki Literature SAGA!

The following is one big Fused Loop with *Zombie Land Saga* .

Doki Doki Literature Club Infinite Loops Compilation Chapter 27, "Special Event":

The Doki Doki Literature SAGA!

27.1 – Opening, by SMXsonic

Monika Woke up on the hardwood floor. That was the first thing that told her that she was in a fused loop. One where…well she wasn't an AI, but she didn't feel totally human either…odd.

Lightning struck as she checked her surroundings. She seemed to be in the den of an old house…alone.

"Um…hello?" she called out.

Lightning struck again as seven figures rose up. Monkia turned to greet them only to see sunken red eyes, rotting skin in various shades of blue. That was enough to send all her rationality out the window. She ran through the only door she could see and into the hall, grabbing a bannister to catch her breath.

"Okay, Monika," she said to herself, "you're in another zombie Loop. You knew you had to deal with this eventually, you have to not panic."

She felt a ping.

"Monika?"

"Natsuki? Where are yo-AGH!"

She was met with a pink-haired zombie girl that looked a little emaciated.

"Are you alright, Monika?" Natsuki asked.

"You're a zombie!" Monika cried.

"Yeah," Natsuki said. "So are you."

And then Monika was a zombie. She looked at her hands which were a deathly blue tone and more than a little rotten.

"...AAAAGH-"

Natsuki took her president by the shoulders and shook her. "Get ahold of yourself! Weren't you just saying not to panic!?"

"Y-you're right! A-are the others here?"

"Yeah, they're zombies too."

Monika shuddered.

"Zombies and Sailor Venus…you have some very eclectic fears, prez."

" I-in any case we should find them and figure out where we are."

"I think I have an idea…"

They both heard a creak in the floor. The two girls turned to see seven figures moving towards them.

"Oh, hey! Those must be the locals!" Natsuki said. She raised her arm to greet them until she felt her other arm pop off.

Monika ran through the hallways holding Natsuki's arm by her side. She eventually crashed into her other clubmates. One, a short zombie girl with peach hair styled into a bob, with a rather distinctive

bruise on her neck. The other was a tall zombie girl with long purple hair with a hole in her uniform which revealed some stitching on her abdominal area.

"Yuri! Sayori! You're zombies too! But at least I know you!"

"Are you okay, Monika?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, just being hunted down by zombies."

"Is that why you have an arm with you?" Yuri asked.

Monika glanced at the severed arm she was carrying and dropped it with a squeak.

"Hmm…it's sorta disappointing," Yuri commented. " Our skin isn't nearly as decayed as I thought it would be, our limbs pop on and off way too easily, and there isn't any bones in the sockets we leave behind."

"Yuri?" Sayori more commanded than asked. "How about you… don't?" The peach haired zombie nodded over to the club president, who was curled in a fetal position squeaking in terror.

"Oh," Yuri vocalized.

"Girls? Is Monika in there with you and my arm?" Natsuki's voice asked from behind the door.

"Yeah, they're both here," Yuri answered.

After some mumbling from the behind the door, Natsuki walked into the room.

"So, they're Franchouchou alright," Natuski confirmed as she retrieved her arm. "Although I think this is their first fused loop. Is Moni in any shape to give the Speech?"

The other two club members indicated their quivering leader.

Natsuki squatted down and poked her president. "Hey, this isn't the best way to show them the club ya know, They don't actually wanna hurt you…"

Monika coughed and sat up, "You-you're right…I-I think I'm good."

"You sure?" Sayori asked.

Monika nodded. "Y-yes, I am better than a silly phobia."

"I wouldn't call 'necroambulophobia' silly,." Sayori pointed out.

Natsuki walked over to the door and opened it, allowing seven more zombie girls to enter. Amazingly, Monika didn't scream. They all knelt down across from the Literature Club, the Club doing in kind.

"Um, Hello!" the redheaded zombie greeted sweetly. "I'm sorry if we scared you. It just kind of happens…you know, zombies and all."

A tiny squeak emitted from Monika. The blonde looked at the red head. "Not helping, Egghead."

"Oh, um…right…I-I guess I should just introduce us then." The first zombie cleared her throat. "I am Sakura Minamoto."

She pointed at the blonde zombie.

"That's Saki Nikaido."

She motioned to a black haired zombie,

"Ai Mizuno,"

To the white haired zombie,

"Junko Konno,"

The zombie taking a drag on a pipe,

"Yugiri,"

The youngest zombie,

"Lily Hoshikawa,"

And the Zombie with a vacant look.

"And that's the Legendary Tae Yamada."

Sayori had to be the one to ask. "Why is she Legendary?"

"Wish we could tell ya, Peach," Saki said.

"Alright…then." Sayori took a moment to shake off the need to ask more questions. "Well, I'm Sayori."

"I'm Natsuki," the pinkette said, raising her hand. "Big fan, by the way."

"Yuri," said the one with purple hair with a nod.

There was a long silence as the three literature club members looked to their president.

"Moni?" Sayori prompted.

"…I'M FINE! I'mFineI'mfineI'mfine…"

Sayori's eyelids drooped. "And that's our club president, Monika… you'll have to excuse her, she's had a bad time with zombies."

Monika squeaked and closed her eyes tight.

Sayori sighed. "Hey, Yuri, you wanna explain things while I Force Calm the prez?"

Yuri nodded and produced a journal marked 'THE SPEECH' in bold ink. "So, you guys have been repeating the same period of time over

and over, right?"

Sakura nodded. "You guys too?"

Yuri nodded. "See, it all begins with the World Tree, Yggdrasil …"

[LINEBREAK]

"…And that's how Yggdrasil was made~" Monkia cheered.

"Seriously, is she okay?" Saki asked.

"Yeah," Sayori confirmed. "She's just like this when she's under Force Calm."

"I am scared out of my MIND right now~" Monika chirped drunkenly, "but! Soy Sauce turns all my bad thoughts into happy thoughts~!"

"Soy Sauce?" Ai asked.

Sayori shrugged. "I dunno, that's just something she just came up with while she was drunk."

"So wait, we're stuck repeating until Arpino, basically forever?"

Natsuki rested her head on her chin. "Well you guys are relatively new, so it's very likely you'll get expansions."

"Yggy's always remembering something," Monika slurred. "Sometimes something will just *pop* and suddenly it's a thing."

"Very astute, prez" Sayori said.

Monika grinned dumbly.

Sakura hummed in thought. "Okay, so…sometimes I begin these loops before I die, and no matter how hard I try, I barely get through the day without getting hit by a truck."

Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, sometimes Yggdrasil kind of railroads things."

Sakura looked at the floor again. "I knew it…I'm just a cosmic plaything."

Sayori took a sharp breath but said nothing.

"Hey, Sakura…" Ai began.

"No, No, I'm…I'm fine…I mean we're going to be going through a lot of…" Sakura looked at the Literature club. "Fused?" Getting a nod from the three of them and a goofy thumbs up from Monika, she continued, "Fused loops, there must be SOMEthing I can use to get revenge on that truck!"

"Oh wow, such young loopers and you've developed quirks," Natuski commented.

"You have no idea," Ai groused as she indicated Sakura and Saki. "Meet DJ Dead Beatz and MC Ride-and-Die."

"Oooh~ You guys are rappers?" Monika cooed. " I too, am a woman of culture!"

"Okay, Moni, don't start spitting rhymes until your mind is a little bit clearer," Sayori said.

"We should get going anyway, Mr. Kotaro is bound to be looking for us," Sakura explained.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry," Sayori smirked as she snapped her fingers. "He only just now remembered that he has eleven Zombies running around his mansion"

Sakura went wide eyed. "What?"

"Just a little magic I learned during the loops." Sayori winked.

Sakura nodded and led the way to the meeting dungeon, ready for more adventures in the infinite loops with the Doki Doki Literature Club.

27.2 – **Minor Scene A, by Masterweaver**

"Hmmm..." Yuri took a small knife and started whittling a gentle line down the wood block in front of her. "That looks about right."

Lily walked into the room. "Yuri-chan, Saki was asking for-oh my gosh are you holding knives with your hair?!"

"Hmm? Oh yeah, I apprenticed under Bayonetta for a loop."

"Who's Bayonetta?"

Yuri turned and looked at the adorable twelve-year-old zombie looking innocently up at her.

"...an interesting woman," she finally replied. "She does things with her hair. Taught me some of them."

"Neat! Anyway, Saki heard Natsuki say you had a motorcycle collection-"

"Probably nothing as fancy as her customs, but...yeah, I suppose I could show that off once I'm done here."

Lily blinked. "Show them off?"

"Subspace Pocket."

"Right, the soul...hammerspace thing." Lily nodded. "So what should I tell Saki?"

"Tell her...that she's going to have to bring her best to the race tonight," Yuri said, an evil smirk crossing her face.

27.3 – Driving, by SMXsonic

"You're sure about this?" Saki asked. "I kinda hate ta ask ya to use one of your bikes for this."

She and Yuri were in full make up, standing in an empty parking lot, with nothing but the faint sounds of a motorcycle…being driven in only the most technical sense of the word.

"It's fine, I can just Pocket another one if things get hairy," Yuri confirmed.

"Yeah, yeah, the soul pocket thingy." Saki pressed. "But, I'm a biker ya know? Saccing a bike for someone else…that's just hard core."

Suddenly a motorcycle swerved in front of them. The cute redhead riding the motorcycle was struggling to control it.

"Down foul beast!" Sakura screamed, "You are but a machine, I am human! YOU WILL OBEY ME!"

"She's reaching Monika levels of melodramatic here isn't she?" Yuri observed.

Saki nodded. "Yeah, I mean we kinda had to revisit our deaths, but Egghead was special."

"Reverse Amnesia, right?"

"Man, it's so weird to know that you're an anime in other worlds."

Yuri nodded.

"Thankfully Emo Sakura doesn't come out all that often since we started this Looping stuff," Saki continued.

"Yggdrasil stores Loopers' memories into itself. Things like amnesia don't affect us."

At this point, Sakura was doing some impressive donuts on the motorbike. It would be even more impressive if she did them

intentionally. And thus she started to lose even more control and crashed into a lightpost.

"So, what did we learn?" Ai asked Sakura's head, which was currently in her lap as both Yuri and Saki were rebuilding Sakura's body.

"All motor vehicles are evil, and one day I shall conquer them all…" Sakura muttered darkly.

Ai sighed as she knew that was going to be the best answer she got.

27.4 – An Uncomfortable Talk, by Masterweaver

Natsuki inhaled deeply, stretching her hands on her knees as she looked out over the mansion's lawn. "Okay. Just say what needs to be said. You're the blunt one, Nats, you can do this."

Lily stepped out onto the balcony, her expression curious. "Yugirin said you wanted to talk with me?"

"Eh, less wanted, more needed." Natsuki patted the bench beside her. "Come on."

The young girl eyed her warily as she sat down. "So…what did you need to talk to me about?"

Natsuki didn't look at her. Not directly.

"...So, I'm a video game character in my baseline. And I don't know how much you know about video games, but there's a lot that happens in the development process. Ideas that sound interesting but don't make it to the final product." She cleared her throat. "It's...a minor detail, one that doesn't happen every loop, but pret-ty often one of those ideas was that I might be a transgender girl."

Lily perked up. "Oh?"

"Like I said, that usually doesn't make it to the final cut. Most loops I'm born female-well, for as much a value of 'born' that you can get when you're just a bunch of pictures on a screen. But it happens sometimes." Natsuki shrugged. "And to be honest, because I am naturally a bundle of ones and zeros, that kind of thing is not nearly as big an issue for me as it would be for a natural-born human, BUT. I recognize it can be an issue, and I've experienced enough of what comes with transgenderism to understand why. So...that's why we're having this talk. Why I'm the one talking. Because this is one of those talks where we acknowledge the ugly side of reality-not because we like it, but because you have to be ready."

The girl bit her lip. "Is this the 'some people will hate you for being what you are' talk? Cause my pappy already gave me that talk."

"That's part of it. And the whole 'a lot of people are going to be confused' talk, but honestly? I think you're already in a good position with most of that. Figuring yourself out so young, having a supportive if not necessarily totally understanding father, the whole 'never going to face puberty' thing, and...yeah. No, this talk is mostly going to be about how Yggdrasil itself is going to react."

Lily winced. "Oh."

"Now for the most part, Yggdrasil flat out doesn't care about this sort of thing," Natsuki assured her. "You're not going to get any more flak then you would in a normal situation. Hell, the loops being what they are a lot of people have been genderbent for a few loops, and that form of bigotry-most forms, actually, they aren't accepted or tolerated by Loopers. Transgender, bisexual, black, Muslim, robot, alien, tiefling...if you're looping, you're a person, and you're going to be judged on your actions, not on *what* you are."

"Okay...?"

"Buuuuut Yggdrasil is a tree, so it's twisted. And it's injured, so it's sick. And it's bedridden, so it tries to amuse itself, so it has a sense of humor. A sick and twisted sense of humor."

"I'm..." Lily swallowed. "I'm not sure I like where this is headed."

The pinkette pointed at herself. "My name is Natsuki. Nat. Suki. Yes, I know it's not pronounced that way, but it's spelled that way in English. So, because of puns, I've been Catsuki, Batsuki, Ratsuki, Fatsuki, Tatsuki, Scatsuki-you get the picture. Your name is Lily. So you will spend a loop as a literal lily, I guarantee it. You'll also spend a loop as a lil' E. That's an English pun. Or as Billy. Or as Silly Lily. Or Chilly. And those are just the English puns."

Lily frowned. "I'm...okay, that makes a strange sort of sense, but I'm not sure what this has to do with me being transgender?"

"It's the trans prefix," Natsuki explained. "Transformer. You'll be a car robot thing. Or transactor, you'll be good with money. Stuff like that." She paused. "And...well, this is the reeeeeeeally nasty bit. Are you ready for this?"

"I...guess?"

"One of the slurs for transgender people is 'trap.' So there are going to be loops where you are a literal bear trap." Natsuki clicked her hands together. "You know, a metal circle with jagged teeth. Like in the cartoons. Or maybe you'll just have one in your mouth instead of your teeth. Or you could just replace Admiral Ackbar."

Lily stared at her. "What."

"Yeah...it's beyond stupid, but it'll happen. Once or twice every thousand to ten thousand loops, but it'll happen."

"...I mean, that's just...dumb," Lily said flatly. "Like, seriously dumb. Like, I...it's dumb! It's not even mean, it's just DUMB!"

"Yep."

Lily huffed. "And I'm going to have to go through that?"

Natsuki hissed a sharp inhale. "See...every time that happens, and it's going to be rare, but every time that happens, you get a choice. Either you endure it, or you decide to skip the loop."

"Skipping loops like that sounds like a good idea," Lily grumbled.

"Well, to skip the loop you have to kill yourself," Natsuki pointed out. "Which, as a zombie, is actually much more difficult. I'd recommend disintegration or setting yourself on fire if you want to be thorough. It'd be painful, but it would do the trick."

Somehow, despite being dead, Lily managed to grow pale. "O-oh."

"Yep, that's the problem. That, and getting to the point where suicide is a casual option is not exactly mentally healthy. And...well, if *you* skip the loop, you'll leave the other Loopers behind."

Natsuki looked out at the lawn. "We rely on each other, more than on anything else, to remain stable in these loops. Sometimes we need to skip, to get out, but most often... most often what we need is each other's presence. Now, you're also going to have the skip-or-stay option when you end up in other zombie loops and wake up, say, literally tearing out a man's throat with your teeth. That's going to be a lot more visceral and traumatic but, since you're not the Anchor, you will never be the only one in that loop, and the others are likely to be going through it as well. This, though... it's a much more unique burden for you. I'm just telling you it's going to happen. Not what to do, because that's a judgment call, but I figured you'd be better off knowing what could come. Even if it's not nice."

Lily nodded to herself, considering her words carefully.

"...well...yeah, I don't like that at all. But I don't think I'm going to run from it. I'm an idol, after all-a symbol for the masses. I should stand up to dumb meanness, that'll inspire a bunch of others to!"

Natsuki chuckled. "You know what, that's good to hear. And hey." She held out a fist. "Pride, right?"

Lily smirked, pounding it. "Pride."

27.5 – Minor Scene B, by Masterweaver

"...Hey Monika?"

"Yeah, Natsuki?"

"So, we're all zombies right now-"

Monika inhaled sharply. "I'm trying not to think about that, thank you!"

"-and we all died in unique ways," Natsuki continued. "That's the nature of this reality. And I'm pretty sure our pre-Awake deaths are tied to our own baseline, but...I'm not sure how your death translated."

With a sigh, Monika pulled up the hair on the back of her head. "Signed up for an experimental brain-uploading procedure. Failed experiment."

"Ah. Yeah, that makes sense."

27.6 – Fears and Doubts, by SMXsonic

"Hello, Lily," Sayori greeted. The small squeak of surprise brought a smirk to her face.

"How do you keep doing that?" Lily asked.

Sayori felt Lily sitting beside her. She took a breath and let it out.

"It's an ability I gained through Looping." She opened one eye to look at the young zombie. "Have you heard of Star Wars?"

"I've seen a couple of the prequels…"

"Our Baseline…isn't the happiest and there was a storm of emotions running through me. Another Looper took me in and taught me the

ways of the Force."

Lily tilted her head. "So…you're a Jedi?"

Sayori shook her head. "Jedi do deal with inner peace, for sure. But I needed control, I needed to learn how to utilize those feelings. I couldn't learn that...not from a Jedi."

Realization dawned on Lily as she quickly looked to the floor.

"I'm not planning on galactic conquest anytime soon, but it's more productive than mere introspection." Sayori inspected Lily, she was still looking at the floor. But the young zombie's eyes didn't show fear, but thought. "You seem to have a torrent of emotions going through you right now," she assessed.

Lily sighed uncomfortably. "I'm…I was talking to Natsuki, and she was telling me about how this tree apparently has a sense of humor…"

Sayori nodded. "Ah, yeah, she's been more of a victim of that than most. Mostly because she has one of the more punnable names…"

Lily looked to Sayori. "It's more than that…I've always been self-assured. You know, I'm always going to be Lily Hoshikawa…but then there's going to be loops where I'm alive and I have to grow up. That's going to be when I start facing myself. I thought that I would be twelve years old, forever, magically. But now…it's a lot to take in."

Sayori hummed in response. "It is a lot to take in, and fear is a natural response, but now you're in the Loops with us, and you have to face them."

"Yeah," Lily nodded. "I guess I just need to find a way to cope."

Sayori stood up. "Tell you what, in the next Loop we have together, tell me if you found something."

"Um…okay?"

"Spending countless years dealing with self-doubt and depression isn't fun. I don't want anyone to deal with it more than they have too."

Sayori left the room, and for some odd reason Lily felt an odd mixture of foreboding and…sweetness?

27.7 – Biker Babes, by Masterweaver.

"Woo." Saki popped off her helmet, shaking her hair clear. "You know something, Papercut? You cheat like a bitch."

Yuri took off her helmet and swished her hair around. "Oh?"

"You kept swapping bikes the whole damn race!"

"No rule said I couldn't. And besides..." The visiting looper smirked. "Jack of all trades and master of none is oftentimes better than master of one."

The two of them locked eyes for a moment or two...and Saki's lips began to twitch. "Hell, I think I'm going to have to like you!"

"How was the race?" Ai asked.

"It was SO COOL!" Lily gushed. "Saki kept sweeping around all the cars and she hopped a bridge and Yuri changed motorcycles every two minutes and they got into a police chase and I think they were riding on walls for a bit-"

Sayori gasped. "Monika, please, please, PLEASE tell me you got that on camera-"

"Yeah, the drones caught it all," Monika assured her. "Fun fact: it ended in a tie."

"WHAT?!"

Monika turned to the two riders who had shouted as one. "Yes. A tie. You left at the same time, crossed the finish line at the same time."

"Are you sure?" Yuri frowned. "I...at the end there, I felt maybe Saki was half an inch ahead."

Saki growled at her. "Hey! If Glitch says it was a tie, then it was a tie!"

"But-"

"No biker's going to sell themselves short for me, Papercut. Don't get me wrong, you're still a cheat..." The blonde smirked. "...but hell, you're an awesome cheat."

"...I guess I'll take that as a compliment?"

"Why am I always 'Glitch'?" Monika grumbled.

"Same reason I'm always 'Cupcake,'" Natsuki replied. "Hey Yuri! VICTORY SMOOCH!" She pounced on the girl, knocking her to the ground.

Saki glanced at them and huffed. "Hey! Egghead, where's my victory smooch?"

"E-Eh?!" Sakura blushed. "Saki, I don't think we-"

Tae tackled the blonde with an eager growl.

Junko squeaked with a blush. "I-what? She, that-are we just going to let that happen?"

Yugiri chuckled. "Well, she did request it."

Ai rolled her eyes. "Once you're done playing around, we need to get back to rehearsal."

27.8 – Minor Scene C, by Masterweaver

Kotaro swept into the dungeon. "GOOD MORNING LAAAAAAAAAAAAADIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIES!"

"What do you mean?" Yuri asked curiously. "Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?"

"All of them at once," Yugiri assured her. "And a very fine morning for a pipe of tobacco out of doors, into the bargain."

"Good one," Monika complimented.

Yugiri gave her a confused look. "...what do you mean?"

"Oh, right, you wouldn't have read The Hobbit, would you?"

Sayori burst out laughing.

27.9 – The Revelation, by Masterweaver.

"Right. Dancing." Monika looked around the practice room. "I know we've done karaoke, and I guess my martial arts training could translate to dancing pretty easily...have we ever had real dancing lessons or just 'let's spaz out for fun' sort of things? Cause I'm wracking my brain here and I'm thinking we might need to learn that for serious this loop."

"Bayonetta taught me some things," Yuri mused.

Sakura gave her a curious look. "Bayonetta? Is she a dancer or something?"

"...or...something." Yuri cleared her throat awkwardly. "Well, most of her moves would probably not be appropriate but I think her stretches would work well."

"Maybe we should wait for Ai," Sayori suggested. "She's usually the one doing the planning, right? I mean that's what the girls told me after watching your anime."

"I'm in an anime," Lily breathed. "I can't believe it. I'm actually an anime heroine, like Sailor Moon!"

"Usagi's actually pretty cool in person," Natsuki said off-handedly.

"YOU'VE MET SAILOR MOON?!"

"All the Senshi, actually. There was this big wedding a while back. Monika even has a laminated certificate from Minako!"

Lily gasped, pouncing on Monika-who shrieked and instinctively threw her across the room, before realizing what she had just done. "OH SHIT-I am so sorry-zombie phobia, I, you jumped, instinct, oh geeze are you okay?!"

"MONIKA!" Sayori grabbed her shoulder. "Deep breath. In...and out. In...and...out."

"Right. Right. Sorry. Yes. Okay..."

"Ow." Lily stood up, snapping her neck back into alignment. "That...huh. Hurt a little."

Saki rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Where is Ai, anyway? She's usually here by now."

As if on cue, Ai stepped into the room. All eyes turned to her, but her eyes focused on one person.

"...Monika?"

"Yes?"

"... *Just* Monika?"

Natsuki inhaled sharply. Yuri rubbed her brow with a sigh. Sayori stood, not quite challengingly.

Monika sagged. "So...you looked us up."

"Doki Doki Literature Club. Spent the whole night...going through the wiki, watching a playthrough or two..."

"At night?" Natsuki shook her head. "That wasn't a good decision, Ai, you're going to get nightmares-"

"I'm not like that anymore." Monika hung her head. "I...I know you can't trust me, but...I'm not like that anymore. I've done my best to help the others, we've all gotten therapy-"

"Why did you hide it?"

Monika looked up. "Wouldn't...wouldn't you?"

"Yes, from ordinary people, but we're zombies. With horrific deaths. So why did you hide it from us?"

Monika considered her for a moment. "...honestly? Mix of reasons. It's habit, for one, I'm not proud of it, and...well, you *are* new loopers. You've got a lot going on right now, just...learning about all this. Why would we want to scare you more than you already have to be?"

Ai crossed her arms.

"They've met Sailor Moon!" Lily pointed out. "Monika even got...an autograph?"

"Sailor Venus gave her an official and laminated Certificate of Absolution for Crimes Against Love," Yuri confirmed. "Monika, if you would?"

Monika bit her lip. "Er...I seem to have misplaced it-"

Sayori sighed, producing the paper and handing it to Ai. The bandaged zombie examined it carefully.

"Oh there it is," Monika said quickly. "Thanks veeps!"

Natsuki and Yuri gave her a pointed look.

"Sailor Moon is amongst the original seven loops," Sayori pointed out quietly. "Ai, please. I know we aren't...exactly the best loop around. We would have told you. When...when we felt you were ready, when we felt you could accept..."

She trailed off.

Junko glanced around the room. "What...what's wrong?"

"...our loop isn't nice," Natsuki admitted with a sigh. "Hell, it's a literal horror story. Psychological horror, mind, not all that blood and guts junk. We didn't want to tell you because...well, because it's horrible. But...yeah, I guess we should have at least mentioned it before..."

With a sigh, Ai handed the certificate back. "I guess...I guess I can understand. I don't think I'd have made the same decision. But...yeah, I guess I can get it. I...don't think I'll be sleeping in the same room as you all for a while, though."

"That's fair," Monika conceded. "And...I'm sorry. For, uh...you know. That...whole thing."

"Wait, wait wait wait, hold up here." Saki held out a hand. "So you're from a video game, right?"

"Yes?"

"Then how are you here?"

"It's...a fused loop-?"

"No, no, no, I mean how are you here if you're from a video game that exists in-?"

"Oh!" Monika laughed. "Most likely our pre-Awake selves were just random girls who just so happened to share names with the DDLC game characters."

"...what, that's it? Just coincidence?"

Natsuki sighed. "Saki, one thing you'll learn real quick about Yggdrasil-it loves stupid coincidences."

27.10 – Consulting the Expert, Scene 1, by Masterweaver

"Hey, Yugiri?"

Yugiri looked up from her shamisen. "Sayori-san. Is there something you wish to discuss?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, I have a project I've been working on for a bit, and I'm thinking maybe I need a fresh perspective."

"Very well..." Yugiri gestured for her to continue.

Sayori knelt down. "You see, because of her past, Monika is kind of put off on the idea of love. And I think that's not a good thing-not for her. I'm fairly sure she's not asexual, and she's definitely not aromantic, but I don't know how to convince her to give dating a try. What do you think?"

Yugiri took a puff from her kiseru thoughtfully. "…love cannot be merely chosen. It must be grown. And it cannot grow in a soil without love. Before you convince her to seek romance, convince her to seek friendship. The deeper bonds will form in time."

"…mmm." Sayori hissed sharply. "Yeah...I get what you're *saying,* but…thaaaaat didn't really work for me."

"Many seeds can share the same soil, even if only a few sprout."

"Hmmmm. Alright." Sayori nodded, standing up. "Thanks for the advice, Yugiri. I'll take it to heart."

27.11 – Goals, by Masteweaver

"Okay everyone!" said Monika, smiling beneath her blindfold. "We need to talk about our to-do plan for the loop!"

Sayori stared at her. "Uh...I understand your necroambulophobia, but why the blindfold? Don't you have some sort of smartglasses that can filter in living appearances by this point?"

"...good point. One moment, I'm going to go into my subspace pocket."

Natsuki glanced over at Sayori. "I thought it was ambulonecrophobia. Necro second, because 'walking dead'."

"Actually, officially it's kinemortophobia," Yuri corrected. "Greek roots, not Latin. I Googled it."

Junko blinked. "There's actually a name for the fear of zombies?"

"I'm not surprised," Ai mused. "There's a name for the fear of peanut butter getting stuck to the roof of your mouth."

"Arachibutyrophobia," Sakura agreed with a nod.

Yugiri gave her a look. "How do you know that?"

"Lonely loops, looked it up online."

Saki groaned. "You all sound like you're about to start slinging around magic spells."

"What's the matter, Saki-chan?" Lily gave her a concerned look. "Do you have sesquipedalophobia?"

"No! I don't even know what that is!"

Lily grinned smugly. "The fear of long words."

Saki blinked for a moment, before glaring at the little girl. "Alright, fine, that was cute." Despite her anger, a small grin was on her face.

Monika popped back into reality, now wearing a set of goggles. "Had to program in a new filter, but I should be okay now! Anyway. Our

checklist for the loop!" She counted off on her fingers. "First, we need to teach you how to Ping and make a subspace Pocket. These skills are essential for any and all Loopers! Secondly, we have to educate you about the dangers of Yggdrasil. Fused loops, variant loops, punishment loops, malicious looping entities...there are universes out there that aren't nice at all. Apart from that, though, I am open to any suggestions. That said," she added, turning to her fellow club members, "as Franchouchou are the new Loopers, I will put their suggestions on higher priority than any of ours, understood?"

"Makes sense," Natsuki agreed.

"NUMBER 1!" Monika pointed at Sakura. "What do you want to accomplish?"

"Uh, um...I'd like to beat that truck, somehow..." Sakura fiddled with her hair. "Maybe if I learned how to drive?"

"Alright, driving lessons for Sakura. Cars first, so I guess that would be Natsuki." Monika turned to Saki. "NUMBER 2!"

"Take over Japan!"

"Big dream! Might not be possible this loop!"

"Take over Saga!"

Monika crossed her arms. "Are you just trying to challenge us while we're here?"

"Nope," Yuri said. "I can confirm that Saki's dream of ruling the country has existed since Baseline, according to the Hub Backups."

"That is still strange to think about," Junko mumbled.

"Okay, we'll go over a list of viable conquest methods later. And educate you on various political philosophies." Monika cleared her throat. "NUMBER 3!"

"I'm still trying to master my electrokinesis," Ai said. "I've gotten it to a point where I can semi-reliably charge something, but anything beyond that..."

"Not to sound stereotypical, but I think Sayori could help you there."

Sayori gave Monika a thumbs-up and a grin. "No problemo, El Presidente!" she chirped.

"Alright. NUMBER 4!"

"Meep!"

"What do you want to accomplish this loop?"

"Um..." Junko glanced around. "I'm...fine with being an idol? I don't need to do anything strange..."

Monika peered at her carefully. "...alright. That's okay. We don't have to do anything big this loop. But I feel like I should insist that you write some new songs for us to sing."

"But Kotaro writes all our songs."

There was a moment where Monika was very, very still.

"...Kotaro."

"Um...yes." Junko tilted her head curiously. "He's our manager. He...he writes our songs."

"In Baseline. He's not looping, so he doesn't make new songs."

"Well...no..."

"Do you mean to say," Monika stated slowly, "you've been singing the same songs since you started looping?"

Franchouchou started sharing concerned looks.

"Weeeeell," Sakura managed, "sometimes we sing other songs, when we find them."

"Find. Them." Monika's voice was disbelieving. "You...don't write your own songs."

"...no?"

Monika took a slow, deep, calming breath, and let it out.

"...unacceptable."

Sayori frowned. "Monika-"

"Our world!" Monika overrode her, "Is defined by two things-as Ai very well found out during her research binge. Our love of literature, and psychological horror. And the thing is, I, and the others, DO NOT LIKE that we are known for being psychological horror. So we have honed our skills with literature, to the point where we can define ourselves as The! Literature! Club! In the Loops."

"Oh, she's going off," Natuski murmured.

She gestured at Franchouchou. "When you go out into the multiverse, you'll find something similar. I ask you this, would you rather be known for your rotting flesh...or for your gorgeous voices? You want to be an idol group, you HAVE to be an idol group capable of adapting to whichever realm you find yourself in. Being able to dance together, sing together, that's only part of it. Being able to attract attention, keep it, expand upon it...yes, you do that well. BUT. If you can only filk? If you sing songs that have been sung countless times before? Then you will find yourself reliant on your library."

Yuri sighed, giving Franchouchou an apologetic look.

Monika shook her head. "No. No, I cannot-I *will* not! I WILL NOT let you stumble into the multiverse and find your skills wanting! I am going to teach you, ALL OF YOU! How to write songs! Beat, Rhythm,

Tempo! Rhyme, Meter, Form! Modulation, Notation, Melody! You will breathe music and musical theory, and by the end of this loop you will have each! EACH! Written and performed one song! SO I SWEAR, UPON MY CODE!"

For a moment, there was silence.

"...Yeah, I'm down," Saki agreed.

"Could be fun," Lily mused.

"I thought Anchors were supposed to be the sane ones?" Ai asked.

"Mentally stable," Sayori replied. "Which...is a critical distinction. Excuse me, I need to drag Monika off for a moment..."

27.12 – Minor Scene D, by Masterweaver

"You seem to like Tae-chan a lot," Sakura said.

Sayori hummed, stroking the hair of the undead woman currently nipping her arm. "She reminds me of Hiroaka."

"Who?"

"Our player character. Technically he's a faceless insert-name-here, but we call him Hiroaka for simplicity's sake."

Sakura tilted her head for a moment, before blinking rapidly. "Oh, yes, that's right. Dating sim. I...that's kind of strange to think about."

"And being a zombie idol group isn't?"

"Graaagh," Tae agreed thoughtfully.

"Anyway, I'm Hiroaka's childhood friend," Sayori explained. "Well, that's the programmed backstory. So I'm usually the one that hangs around with him. The others..."

She sighed somberly. "I don't think they dislike him, so much as ignore him. It's...not exactly their fault, but they don't seem to understand his simplicity."

Sakura nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, I think I understand. I mean, at the beginning of, um, baseline? That's the word?"

"Yes."

"Well, at the beginning, the girls don't really interact with Tae that much. I'm the one that mostly handles her. It gets better as time goes on, but..."

Sakura shrugged helplessly.

"Yeah..." Sayori giggled when Tae-chan bit down on her shoulder. "She can be quite a handful, can't she?"

"A little bit. Hey, maybe you could help me teach her dance moves!"

"I'd like that, Sakura."

27.13 – Thunder Down Under

Ai Mizuno knew very well what an honest-to-God clap of thunder sounded like. She also knew that lightning *generally* required storm clouds to be present in the sky, and today the sky was cloudless. So, naturally, she went outside to find out what was going on.

What she found was Sayori in the back yard, either shooting lightning bolts into the sky *from her hands* , or drawing lightning down from the cloudless sky *into her hands* . Either way, she wasn't glowing or anything.

"How are you doing that?!" Ai asked her, astonished.

"I'm a Sith, remember?" Sayori replied.

Ai blinked. "Okay…what's a Sith?" she asked.

"Traditionally? Evil space-wizard-ninjas with red laser-swords," Sayori explained as she casually drew a small glittery-pink metal cylinder from her jean pocket and clicked a button on it. With a *snap-hiss* , an incandescent red beam jumped out of the cylinder before stopping at a length of roughly three feet. "But my Master taught me a better way," Sayori continued, turning around and giving Ai a cheerful smile.

Ai flinched backwards, however, when she noticed Sayori's eyes were yellow. Then Sayori blinked and they were red, just like hers. "My Master taught me to use the very darkness that the Sith serve–not the way they do, as a means of self-advancement–but as a tool for making positive changes. Negatives into positives, light from darkness, all that good jazz. She took me on as her apprentice and taught me to use the Dark Side to manage my depression."

"How does *that* work?" asked Ai.

"Basically, by becoming a master over dark energies outside of me, I gain control over the dark energy in my mind. What once was a millstone around my neck is now the battery I use for THIS!" Sayori exclaimed as she threw a hand in the air and loosed another streak of blue lightning into the air.

"…wait, you mean…your lightning is literally…no way, that's crazy," said Ai, folding her arms.

"Is it? Is it really? Is it really that outlandish, in a world where the dead can be risen and this loop's versions of me and my friends just happen to be dead ringers in both names and appearance as the characters in a game that exists in this world and also serves as the alternate universe back-up of the world we actually come from? Just *saying* that makes my head hurt. Trust me when I say this, the multiverse is bonkers. The fact that I can channel my depression into free electrical energy is far from the craziest thing you'll see in the Loops."

Ai went from looking skeptical to looking thoughtful. "Huh. Do…does someone *have* to be depressed to do that? Could you teach me to throw lightning around without, y'know…" she trailed off as it suddenly occurred to her that the way she was asking the question could come across as insensitive.

Sayori's smile shrunk a bit, but she didn't seem to be offended. "The short answer? Yes. Yes, I *could* teach you the ways of the Dark Side. Not in this loop, however; you'd need to have a loop where you possess Force-sensitivity, first, just like I did. But every Looper visits every Branch eventually, so you can rest assured that it *would* happen. And no, you don't have to have depression to do what I can do, either. Sith Lightning is a compressed and focused expression of pure negative energy, and can be drawn from any 'dark' emotion. Fear, anger, pride, hatred. Not just misery and self-loathing. But frankly, Ai, I don't think this path is for you. You're a very proud person, after all, and immersing yourself in the Dark Side can very, very easily inflate that pride into self-destructive arrogance. To follow the same path I have means facing your own darkness. Coming face to face with the worst parts of yourself; things you don't even know about because they're so uncomfortable to think about that your mind pushes them down and out of sight for your own peace. To embrace the Dark Side is easy, but the Dark Side is not just a tool or source of power. It was a will of its own and craves destruction. Wanton, unfocused, indiscriminate destruction, including your own, in the end. The Dark Side uses those who use it; it corrupts those whose wills are weaker than its own, which is practically anyone… though Loopers like us gain a pretty big advantage once we've got enough loops under our belt."

"Is that how you've avoided being corrupted?" Ai asked.

Sayori snorted, "What makes you think I have? Because I wear a friendly smile and my eyes sparkle? Because I'm still a good friend to the three girls who mean more to me than my own life does? Because I *didn't* give in to the intrusive thought of telekinetically bouncing you off a wall when you confronted Monika yesterday?"

Ai jumped back at that. Sayori's eyes were shining yellow again, but that shine was already subsiding to dull-red. Her small smile hadn't wavered at all, but Ai felt a tension in the air that made the hair on her neck stand up.

And then it was gone. Sayori giggled, and in spite of her better reason Ai couldn't resist the feeling of calm that the sound suffused in her. "Relax, Ai. I've got no intention of hurting you. Desire and motive are different matters, but I have no *intention* of hurting you."

Ai blinked, twice, and then steeled herself. "Hey, look, I get that you care about your friend and all but–"

" *But nothing* ," Sayori said flatly, tonelessly, and Ai found that she couldn't force another word past her lips. "We would have told you before the end of the loop. We *always* do. Our omission was *not* for our benefit, it was for yours. Bad enough that we tell you this wacked out story about a god-tree-supercomputer being sick and impossible to conceive of universes that you'll someday visit, and the only proof we can offer you are the souvenirs in our subspace Pockets and all the weird powers we've learned. We tried to make things easier *on you* by not throwing in the fact that we come from a psych-horror game. When it comes to other Loopers, Monika is honest almost to a fault, and certainly to her own detriment at times. But she believes in something called 'utilitarian philosophy', which means if she wants to help someone she wants them to feel comfortable around her, so that she can help them to the best of her ability without having to deal with trust issues and stuff. Once she's helped them, she'll tell them the truth and let them judge her however they see fit. And for better or for worse, Monika never begrudges other people their right, in her eyes, to judge her for what she was, *once* . She's got a bit of a Martyr Complex, that way."

Ai bit her lower lip, but she didn't break eye contact with Sayori. "I get what you're saying, but I still don't like that you kept it a secret from us."

Sayori shrugged. "Fine. I can't tell you how to feel. But a word of friendly advice; most Loopers have an unspoken rule that we don't judge each other for what we did when we didn't know better. Every Looper has things they regret. If *you* don't yet, you will, someloop. No one keeps their record spotless forever."

"Huh. Y'know, yesterday, I had you pegged as more optimistic than this," said Ai as she sat down on one of the swings.

"I like presenting that face to people, because that's the kind of person I aspire to be," Sayori admitted, holding her hand out palm-up. Electricity crackled over her hand before coalescing into a bright, sparking, blue-white ball of energy.

Which she then started hacky-sacking.

"And I do consider myself an optimist, when all is said and done. But I'm not blind to how things really are. I mean, how could I be, all things considered?"

Sayori fell silent, and for a time Ai just watched her play with her little ball of lightning. Finally she spoke up, "So…you can't teach me? Or won't?"

"Hey, I'm not a grudge-holdy sort of person, Ai," said Sayori. "Like I said, you're allowed to feel however you feel about whatever. I'm not going to hold it against you. Emotions are personal things, and you should never deny them. Yours or other people's. If you really *want* to learn, I'm willing to teach you, Ai. But I honestly think you'd rather go a different route. Trust me, there's a billion ways to control electricity in the multiverse. Monika can…well, she *knows* how to bend lightning, but she has trouble actually doing it. But like my Force powers, that's something you have to be born in a loop with, she can't teach it to you right now."

"She can *bend* lightning?"

"Well, 'bending' is what it's called, but really it's just converting your body's internal energy into electrical potential and then setting it free it a general direction of your choice. It's a specialized form of 'firebending', which is a discipline that allows you to create and manipulate fire. But again, you can only learn it if you're born with the ability to use it. If you were a firebender Monika would be able to teach you, but you're not so she can't."

"So…how are you going to help me?" asked Ai.

"Like this," said Sayori before she kneed the ball of electricity straight up, then spun around and kicked it straight at Ai. The ball flew right into her chest.

Ai had been struck by lightning before, many times by now, but if getting struck by lightning were akin to power chugging a few gallons of water, then this felt like having an entire Olympic-sized swimming pool injected straight into her heart.

So she was mildly surprised when she didn't *explode* .

"Tell me, Ai Mizuno…does it feel like 'unlimited power'?" asked Sayori with an impish grin.

Ai didn't remember standing up from the swing, but she was standing up, and she was staring down at her hands. She was used to electrification making her body feel like it was vibrating, but now every cell in her body felt like it was vibrating *just* short of hard enough to fly free from her body. She could see her lightning scars *glowing* brightly enough to be seen through the bandages around her hands and forearms, in addition to the customary electric-blue glow that her body was now emanating.

" **I don't know about 'unlimited', but it sure feels like it's as much as I could possibly hold,** " Ai replied.

"Neat! Now I'm kind of curious how much of a charge your body can actually hold…but we're not close enough to be conducting

experiments on each other, so for now," Sayori danced up to her and reached for Ai's hand. Ai very quickly found herself standing on the other side of the yard. She didn't recall consciously deciding to move away from Sayori, just thinking it was probably a good idea not to let the other girl touch her in this state.

Except Sayori was *still* right in front of her, somehow, and still reaching for her hand.

To Ai's astonishment, Sayori grabbed her hand without suffering any ill effects. She could *feel* the massive reservoir of electrical energy trying to empty itself into the relatively super-low potential of Sayori's body…but something was blocking it. It made her hand sting, just a little.

"We're…gonna want to do this somewhere we won't cause too much damage," said Sayori.

The next thing Ai knew was the intensely uncomfortable, but not quite *painful* sensation of being completely blind and squeezed through a very, very narrow space, and then she and Sayori were standing in the middle of nowhere, as far as she could tell. Yellow grass stretched out like a sea in every direction, and in the distance Ai saw–

" **Are those *kangaroos* ?!** "

"Yep! Welcome to the Land Down Under, Ai-chan!" said Sayori, slapping her on the back. "We're at least a hundred miles from the nearest human population center, and I'm already sending out a mass Force Suggestion for any stray people and animals nearby to give us a very wide berth."

Indeed, the mob of kangaroos were already making a hard right and bounding away from them with seemingly one mind.

"I can't teach you to *make* lightning the way I can," Sayori released Ai's hand and stepped away, igniting her scarlet lightsaber as she

did. "But I can try to teach you the disciplines I use to direct *my* lightning, and see if it improves your control. So go on and *try* to blast me. Don't worry, you're not going to hurt me," Sayori turned around to face Ai as she finished walking. She was about ten meters away.

" **Hold on, I don't want to use this as a weapon–** " Ai began protesting.

"Yeah, I used to be strictly anti-violence myself, too," said Sayori. "Then my friends and I got a zombie apocalypse sprung on us, and there was dingle-all that I could do about it."

Ai winced. Sayori continued speaking, "I talked to Sakura. She told me about your experiments in electrokinesis. Your mistake was jumping straight into messing with electromagnetism and trying to handle delicate circuitry. You have to start with the *basics* , which is 'throwing big honking bolts of lightning in the general direction you want them to go'. Once you figure out how to do *that* competently, then we can work out how you do the smaller, more complicated things. So, start by discharging all the juice I just put in you in the right direction."

" **Ugh, phrasing,** " Ai deadpanned. In so much as a person could deadpan when their voice was reverbing and auto-tuned.

Sayori smirked. "Right. But like I said, start with 'aim'. Hit me with your best shot, Ai-chan!"

Ai took a deep breath, and then raised a hand in Sayori's direction.

27.14 – Consulting the Expert, Scene 2, by Masterweaver

"Yugiri! Got a minute?"

Yugiri put down her shamisen. "Natsuki-san, hello! I am not doing anything too pressing at the moment..."

"Yeah, so..." Natsuki draped herself in a chair. "I don't know if you've picked up on Sayori's thing with Monika-she's trying to get Monika to start dating."

"Ah," Yugiri said, nodding knowingly.

"And I mean, I get it. Sayori's sort of guilty that Monika's so consumed with guilt, and since she kind of is responsible for that being the first to die in our game-which is not her fault, but that's how she feels about it I think-I kind of think she's focusing too hard on helping Monika recover instead of letting her grow, you know?"

Yugiri kept her amused smile hidden behind her kiseru. "It can be difficult to cease assisting a friend, even when such assistance is unwarranted. Care is an expression of concern, after all, and your concerns run deep."

"I guess," Natsuki grumbled. "It's just... I dunno, sometimes I think she's focusing too much on what she thinks Monika needs instead of what Monika actually needs."

"Perhaps her focus is an expression of her own needs?"

Natsuki considered that thoughtfully. "...You might be right. You know, you're not half bad."

27.15 – Thoughts, by Masterweaver

"...you've been very quiet this whole time."

Junko glanced up from her book as Natsuki sat down next to her. "I have?"

"The other girls are more engaged," Natsuki clarified. "Ai's researching us, Sakura's hanging onto Monika's words about Anchorship, Saki is trying to…I think it's a war of mutual amazement, Lily is just so excited she's an anime character, even Yugiri is

watching what we do with some interest. You, though...you're just nodding and going along with it."

Junko shrugged. "I...don't think they realize what this means, entirely. Reality being broken...us being anime characters...you being from another world, not even human..."

"Yeah, I get that." Natsuki hummed thoughtfully. "You know, I'm the least 'deep' of us Dokis, but even I get...philosophical sometimes. This whole situation...it might take some time to sink in. These girls are all more doers than thinkers...I don't mean they're stupid, just that they prefer to act instead of contemplate."

"Yugiri's a thinker."

"True enough. She's still engaged with us, though. She's observing us, instead of just..." Natsuki gestured vaguely.

"...maybe we need a thinker," Junko pointed out.

"Maybe. So...whatcha thinkin' about?"

"...a lot of things. It's all jumbled. Do...do you think anybody else from this world will loop?"

Natsuki hummed thoughtfully. "Kotaro is a pretty sure bet, given how important he is in your lives. Tae...I'm on the fence. She fits most Looper checkmarks, it's just whether or not she's intelligent enough to loop that I'm not sure about...Romero is also an edge case, I've heard of pets looping but that's pretty rare. A couple of you have pre-death family, Takeo, Reiko, Maria...all possible Loopers from outside the mansion. Beyond that, I wouldn't expect anyone. I mean I guess there's that reporter guy, but..." She shrugged. "It's not an exact science."

"Reporter guy?"

"Side character in the Hub Backups. Starts connecting the dots but doesn't quite believe the picture they paint."

Junko frowned. "...the Backups, do they...ever go into anything private?"

"There's the hot springs episode, but the anime is pretty child-safe. I mean, aside from showcasing death scenes...and those are all pretty bloodless. I guess there's emotional drama shown..." Natsuki considered for a moment. "...I don't thiiiiiink there's anything there that any of you would object to the rest of you knowing? There's some stuff about Kotaro in the last few episodes, mind. Generally a good idea to share your backups with each other, since it'll be next to impossible to hide that information anyway."

"Oh." Junko glanced at her arm. "How...how exactly did they make our death scenes bloodless?"

"In your case? They cut back out to the plane falling with smoke trailing out of its engine. More an implied event." Natsuki paused. "Have you...ever Awoken on the plane?"

Junko shivered. "...yes."

The pink-haired girl wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "...I hate to be the one to tell you this...but the tree? It likes to mess with us sometimes. Monika has a zombie phobia, so of course we wound up here-where the zombies are harmless, innocent victims. I can promise you, her reaction at the start of the loop was genuine. And..." She cringed. "With your...fear of heights..."

Red eyes shot up. "No. No, please don't-"

"It won't happen all the time," Natsuki assured her. "And...maybe it'll be that you're a bird, or a pegasus, or some other flying creature-but, yes, sometimes you'll be in...aircraft. Or starships, even. I'm sorry."

Junko swallowed, leaning into her. "I...I really don't think I'll like that."

"I don't either." The other girl was silent. "On the other hand...you'll probably also have a disco variant."

"What?"

"You know, a Loop where disco is still popular."

"Wait." Junko leaned back. "What do you mean, 'still popular?' Did disco go out of style or something?"

Natsuki laughed. "Oh honey, you have no idea..."

27.16 – Consulting the Expert, Scene 3, by Masterweaver

"Yugiri-san, I...feel I must request your advice."

Yuguri set aside her shamisen. "I would be quite willing to give it, Yuri-san."

Yuri bowed formally. "In your...previous life, you were trained to handle some level of intimacy, and it is in that regard I wish to approach you."

Yugiri quirked an eyebrow, straightening up. "I see..."

"I have started a romantic relationship with Natsuki, and we are conducting ourselves fairly amicably. However, I feel that we may be approaching a point where... I may wish to engage in more carnal matters, and I am unsure how to determine when she would be ready." Yuri glanced up, trying not to blush. "If I may request advice from you, I would be most appreciative."

Yugiri tapped her kiseru, considering her words carefully. "That you show respect for her opinion is admirable. While discussion should be foremost, remember there are other signals."

"Of course..." Yuri bit her lip. "Though...I am unsure how to read these signals."

"Be gentle with what affections you give, and only proceed beyond if she gives such affections back. If she stops, pull away."

"Hmmm..." Yuri nodded. "Yes...I believe I understand. Thank you for your advice, Yuguri-san."

27.17 – Monika's Song: "I've Got Science!" by Masterweaver

For a moment, the stage was utterly dark. And then, two large tesla coils burst to life, illuminating the three tables on the stage. The central one rested on a raised platform, stairs curving around the wires that dripped from it and trailed to the other two; all three tables had a pair of computer screens on either side of many vials filled with colorful liquid. Midway up each staircase stood a girl, smaller than the groups of three that attended each table, all dressed in labcoats of differing colors.

At the center table, a coral-haired snapped on one rubber glove-the sound reverberating through the audience. Then another glove. Then, she snapped her fingers, and the tesla coils started to hum-a hum that fell in tune with the music rising.

And then, because that wasn't impressive enough, she pulled down her goggles, picked up a microphone, and somersaulted to the stage floor with a maniacal grin.

(Now I'm not blaming every guy)

(who's looked at me and seen only my pretty face)

(cause let's be real it's lovely and pretty people have their place,)

(but HEY NOW.)

(We're living in an age where we can all learn whatever we put to our mind.)

–

(Knowledge is power, and I am smarter than you-)

-

(-but don't worry, I'm a fair goddess.)

The other girls looked up from their chemicals and sang together.

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

As the music kicked up, they started walking up and down the stairs to the rythym. Monika twirled the mike in her hand, flicking her ponytail as lyrics poured from her mouth.

(COMPUTER SCIENCE!)

(Some idiot boy wouldn't leave me alone)

(he kept trying to get me to come home with him)

E

(So I said hey now! What's your e-mail boy?)

(We can talk about saucy stuff online, you know?)

(And he gave it to me with that demanding grin,)

(and I took it with an evil smirk of my own.)

(Got home that night, stretched my fingers,)

(and started tapping away on the keyboard.)

5

(Five minutes looking over his social media)

(his friends warned him about me (how sweet! ha ha!))

15

(Fifteen minutes to program a virus)

(now his computer plays loud music on random nights!)

The girls all raised their goggles for a brief chorus.

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

And Monika brushed off her shoulder with a smirk.

(Every night for years)

(I've illuminated)

(cram school)

(Don't test me, boy,)

(cause I've got)

(SCIENCE!)

The girls, having all swapped tables, started tapping keys on the computers. The screens flashed through a myriad of images, though the shape of the brain was a frequent motif as Monika went down her next lyric.

(PSYCHOLOGY!)

(So I'm sure you've noticed I've got some sexy friends)

((Not the kid, she's just cute, but the rest, ha, sorry girls!))

(And you're not the first to notice, at all!)

(Now my galpal here, she was getting some looks from a guy)

(she really didn't want.)

(I decided to talk up the man, like you do, you know.)

(We started talking about his past, his parents, and oh boy)

(turns out the guy was a total mess.)

2

(Two weeks later we're the best of friends and guess what:)

(He's realized he's gay! (And I happen to know a cute gay guy))

(Yay Yaoi!)

Again the chorus came up, and again the girls all raised their goggles briefly, transitioning tables as Monika held up a warning finger.

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

(Every night for years)

(I've illuminated)

(cram school)

(Don't test me, boy,)

(cause I've got)

(SCIENCE!)

And now the scientists started handling the chemicals, with green-flame bunsen burners and remarkably rhythmic bursts of colored clouds.

(ANTHROPOLOGY!)

(Now, I'm not going to say that diamonds are not beautiful)

(gorgeous rocks, really, gemstones in general are)

(But I don't want a ring with a shiny rock, you know why?)

(I'll just take it apart to make a death ray! (You didn't hear that.))

(No if you really want to impress me, here's what you do:)

(get me something from the Jomon Era, and tell me what it is.)

(And if you're right, maybe I'll consider taking you on a date.)

(A pretty face is nice, but I adore a lovely mind.)

Blasts of fire and sparks announced the next chorus recitation as Monika swept her hand wide.

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

(Every night for years)

(I've illuminated)

(cram school)

(Don't test me, boy,)

(cause I've got)

(SCIENCE!)

(ASTROPHYSICS!)

(I'll freely admit I'm a greedy girl.)

(I mean have you seen all these pyrotechnics? CRAZY!)

(But what I really want is a place all to myself.)

(So every night, when I look up in the sky,)

(I see the planets. And their moons. And everything in between.)

1

(One day, in the future, I'm going to take one of those.)

(Build a home on it, just for me and whoever I invite over.)

... 1 2

(It's a dream... it'd take me a month at least! Maybe two.)

(Shhh, don't tell anyone!)

This time, the journey of the performers was punctuated by the tesla coils screaming alongside Monika's sassy pointer finger.

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

(Every night for years)

(I've illuminated)

(cram school)

(Don't test me, boy,)

(cause I've got)

(SCIENCE!)

Somehow, impossibly, the electricity started arcing the two coils, shifting color as it passed through the clouds of chemical reactions

(ECONOMICS!)

(Okay I'm not going to name any names)

(and actually let's all agree this is purely theoretical)

(since if I get into trouble, I'll have to fix the situation)

(which distracts me from writing these awesome songs.)

(But there was this one company that jacked up their prices)

(for no reason, after I subscribed, and I was like:)

(No.)

(You don't do this to me.)

(You don't do this to my friends.)

(You don't do this to anybody.)

(So, purely hypothetically, I may have made some investments)

...

(funded their competitors, bought shares through shell markets…)

(Basically? They want to scam everyone out of their money?)

(I WILL BEAT THEM INTO MY SERVICE WITH MY MONEY!)

(Hypothetically of course. (Are there any lawyers in the house?))

((And if there are, what should I pay you to work for me?))

(But I'm not doing that because I'm not evil.)

(MWAHAHAHA!)

The screens of the computers ran various formulas and equations as the girls danced through fireworks and electric outbursts, Monika dominating the scene with her mastery of the microphone and swiftly shifting legs.

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

(Every night for years)

(I've illuminated)

(cram school)

(Don't test me, boy,)

(cause I've got)

(SCIENCE!)

(What, did you think I wore this science coat for fun?)

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

(I'll admit, I'm kind of interdisciplinary.)

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

(These goggles? They do a lot more than protect my eyes.)

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

(Anybody want to take me up on a game of wits after the show?)

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

(I've got science!)

| |

(SHE'S GOT SCIENCE!)

| |

(SHE!)

| |

(SHE!)

…

(I…I HAVE)

(SCIENCE!)

At that last drawn-out note, Monika reached out, and for all the world seemed to summon the electricity to her gloved hand. She cackled maniacally with a gleeful smirk and crushed the sparking ball.

"That was... certainly a song," Junko allowed.

"Not my best work," Monika admitted freely. "I can speak Japanese, but I'm not entirely fluent in it. Once I got a rhyming chorus, I realized I couldn't rhyme the whole thing, so I just cheated the lyrics with Google translate."

Ai gave her a flat look. "I noticed."

"So of course, you decided to go with a science-based razzle-dazzle," Natsuki deadpanned.

"I think our dancing helped," Yuri assuaged her.

Lily crossed her arms. "You know, I thought Sayori was supposed to be the lightning-manipulator."

"Sleight of hand," Monika replied dismissively. "That and some really fancy tech in my glove, worked with Asami Sato on it."

Junko cocked her head. "Who?"

"...right, that show didn't really become popular in Japan...I'll catch you up later."

Saki cleared her throat. "Hey, how'd you convince Shades to let you have such a wacky stage setup?"

"Said I'd pay for it myself. And I did."

"How?"

Monika grinned. "What, did you think any of those lyrics were made up? Everything in that song is true. *Everything."*

There was a moment's pause.

"...is this a Looper thing," Sakura murmured to Sayori, "or is it a Monika thing?"

"Eeeeeeeeh, more of a Monika thing," Sayori admitted. "But there's some Looper in there too."

27.18 – Consulting the Expert, Scene 4, by Masterweaver

"Hey, Yugiri, can I ask you something?"

"Monika-san." Yugiri looked up from her shamisen with a grin. "How can the sensei of love assist you?"

Monika blinked. "Uh...what?"

"Ah, my apologies. It is something of a jest amongst us here."

"Right, you were...well, I'm not here for love advice, actually." Monika sighed. "See, I've been trying to learn how to play stringed instruments and...I don't think I'm good at them, something just doesn't click with me. But you know how to play the shamisen, so I was wondering...maybe you could teach me how to play?"

"...yes, actually. I would be most pleased to teach you."

"Thank you." Monika walked over and sat next to her. "Sensei of love, though? Really?"

Yugiri brought her kiseru to her lips with a wry grin. "It is an interesting title, is it not?"

"Yeah. So, how do we start this? Should I hold the shamisen a particular way?"

27.19 – Realization, by Masterweaver

"So where are the Dokis?"

Ai gave Saki a look as she sat down. "They're using the computer. Shopping, I...think." She shook her head. "Well, their version of shopping, anyway."

"How's it different from normal shopping?"

"Monika wrote a virus yesterday to leech money off American billionaires, for one thing. She says it'll probably be found and purged tonight, but she already has the money so it doesn't matter."

Saki whistled in appreciation. "Damn. I mean she's a computer program and all, so that's probably easier for her, but still-going right for the giants, that's pretty bold of her."

Sakura hummed thoughtfully. "You're not wrong, exactly, but...they're billionaires. Even taking a couple million won't really get their attention." She managed a sardonic smile. "Plus, you know, they get away with a lot anyway, so...it's not like they don't deserve it?"

"It's not them taking money from billionaires that's weirding me out. It's...how they're treating things." Ai frowned. "Like...they're skimming off the entire world's resources. Sure they're buying a few luxury items, but a lot of what they're getting is...resources. Gems they can sell in loops without a digital economy, food and water that will help them survive if they loop into a wasteland...and for all that costs, they're only using a little bit of the money for it. They're sending the rest to organizations that make the world better...or something."

For a moment, Franchouchou quietly contemplated the implications of that statement.

"...they treat money like it was nothing." Junko frowned to herself. "Are...are we going to be like that?"

"I...could see it happening," Sakura mused. "I mean...if we put away some yen every loop, over time we'd have a lot of yen."

Saki snorted. "Why are we talking about *money?* Did you see how many bikes Papercut had? I mean she hasn't really modded any of them, but I'm telling you-as soon as I can stick a motorcycle in my subspace pocket I am going to do it and spend every loop I can souping it up."

"Sayori has Star Wars powers!" Lily squealed. "And Sailor Moon is *real!* I can be a real magical girl if I loop into the right universe!" She jumped onto the top of an armchair, posing as the other girls all stared at her. "Pretty Soldier Lily-chan, fighting for love, justice, acceptance, and hamburgers!"

"Why hamburgers?"

"I like hamburgers." Lily shrugged. "Or fries. Anything I can slather in ketchup and mustard, really."

"That's not really healthy," Sakura pointed out hesitantly.

"We're zombies," Junko countered. "Well, we are...at the moment."

Another silence fell over them.

"...this situation...really does open up so many new possibilities," Yugiri mused. "Magics and technologies from other worlds...visiting realities both wondrous and vile...meeting Loopers, like ourselves, trapped and traveling through time."

"I could actually take over Japan," Saki said, slowly. "I mean, it would take me a while to get what I need to do it...and I'd have to spend a lot of loops figuring out how to do it...but I could actually do it."

Ai quirked an eyebrow. "...you could. Huh. I always thought you were just crazy, but you actually could..."

"I'm pretty happy with my life now," Sakura said. "I mean, I still haven't won against that evil truck, but one of these days I will! And besides that, I get to be an idol forever-and I get the best group of girls to dance alongside!"

"Awwww!" Lily tackled Sakura in a hug. "We love you too, Sakura-chan!"

Ai rolled her eyes, not bothering to hide her smile. "I guess...and I guess we could become a multiversal music group." Her smile faded.

"But...there are other loops with zombies..."

Junko shivered. "I...really, really hope we aren't going to end up in those worlds too often."

"I've seen zombie films," Sakura assured her. "And I'm the Anchor. If we end up in a loop like that, I'll make sure things work out."

"You?" Saki snorted. "Egghead, you're not a fighter!"

"Poker."

Ai winced. "Did you have to bring that up?"

"Sorry Ai-chan!"

"...okay, you have *some* guts." Saki frowned. "Man, I'm just realizing- we're in a pretty low-key loop. Like, sure, Sakura got shot that one time, but you girls haven't been in that many fights...I'm going to have to teach you, in case we end up in some crapsack of a world with monsters and shit."

Junko opened her mouth for a moment, before really thinking about it. She curled in on herself quietly.

Saki looked over at her. "But...you know, there are nicer worlds out there too. Like...that pony world the Dokis mentioned. Or some Disney Princess crap. Or the Sailor Moon world!"

Lily coughed into her fist. "Yeeeeeeeah, um, if that world's anything like the anime then I wouldn't say it's *entirely* nice..."

"Whatever. Point is, not every world is hell. And almost every world has heroes, right? So you need to know how to fight, but that doesn't mean you need to fight all the time. You can enjoy yourself."

Ai crossed her arms. "You of all people saying we don't need to fight all the time?"

"What, you think Dorami just drove around beating people up 24/7? Sure, I'd take any challenge, but I'd only challenge people when I needed to."

"It's weird..." Junko glanced up. "We're learning this from...well, from the stars of a dating sim horror story. What does that say about them?"

Silence fell, once more.

"...they are a study in contradiction," Yugiri finally offered. "Sayori is kind and caring, yet holds within her a sorrow so great it allows her to channel dark magics. Yuri is soft-spoken, intelligent, and as aware of the darkness as she is of the light. Natsuki is equally enthusiastic about cute things and dangerous stunts, and treats people both with kindness and with some degree of sass. And then...Monika. A terror in her home, yet so terrified of us; conductor of horrors that she forever feels the guilt of."

Ai glanced away. "Sayori...chewed me out for calling out Monika. And then teleported me down to Australia to teach me lightning control."

"...what," said Saki.

Lily gasped. "She can teleport?!"

"To Australia?!" Junko added.

"See, that's the part that's making me go 'what'," Saki said. "I mean, sure, teleporting, fine, but across the world? With no network-oh, doy, she's a computer program, she can just use the internet, right?"

Ai shrugged. "I mean...we weren't anywhere near civilization..."

"Okay, I'm going back to 'what' now."

"Girls, I think we might be looking at this the wrong way."

Everyone turned to look at Sakura.

"I mean...sure, they're weird, and they have crazy powers, and they're not exactly human. But...look at *us.* We died across the centuries, and we have different backgrounds, and...we're a zombie idol group. But that doesn't mean we're not people, right? The Dokis have a history, and it's scary and strange, but in the end...they're like us. Ordinary girls thrown into extraordinary situations. We can be amazed or frightened, but...I still think we can be friends."

The room fell silent one final time.

And then Tae smashed through the door, throwing the four visiting Loopers onto the ground with a roar of triumph.

"OW!" Monika spat out her ponytail. "Okay, whose leg is in my face?"

Sayori sighed. "That'd be mine, Prez. Can somebody tell me where my arm landed?"

Natsuki growled. "Yuri, I love you, but if you don't get your fat ass off my back-"

"My head's over here!" Yuri snapped. "I don't even know how to untangle us all from this!"

Saki blinked at the tangled pile of mangled bodies. "...okay, how the hell did Tae manage to carry all four of them at once?"

"Stop gawking and help us!

27.20 – Monika's Anchoring Tip of the Day, by SMXsonic

"Whoa!" Sakura yelped as she was pulled into a hallway. "Monika? What's wrong?"

The zombified club president took a cleansing breath. "Sakura Minamoto, as the Anchor of my Loop, I welcome you to the ranks of being Loop Anchor!"

Sakura blinked. " Um…thanks, I guess? I thought we already went through the welcoming thing…"

Monika shook her head. "Look, 'Anchor' isn't just a title given to those who happen to loop more than others. It is a responsibility that must be upheld to the greatest of our ability. We are the ones who Loop first and We are the ones who hold more than any other Looper." She fished a book entitled *An Anchor's Guide to The Multiverse* from her Pocket.

"...your family name is Salvato?" Sakura asked, glancing at the by line of the book.

"Sometimes, but that's not the point," Monika said while opening the book.

"You…really don't have to-"

"An Anchor's first responsibility is to maintain the stability of whatever world she happens to be in for the Loop," Monika interrupted, "Firstly, this means that no matter how bad a loop gets, don't suicide your way out. A Loop without Anchors is a crashed Loop, and Loop crashes are bad for Yggdrasil. A normal crash isn't terribly bad, but it's still a hiccup in the recovery process. Upwards of 90% of your Loops, you're going to be the only Anchor around, so the very existence of that iteration of that reality is going to be using your lifeforce as a lynchpin. Scary thought, I know, but there you have it. And even in Loops with multiple Anchors, each Anchor is a point of stability and each Anchor lost destabilizes that reality by increasing the odds of a loop crash. So, that's rule number one: try to preserve your life if at all possible."

"Um…but, I'm already dead…" Sakura said. "How can I-"

"You won't always be a…revenant." Monkia coughed while saying that last word. "Like I'm not always an AI. That being said, you are a being with a soul, do not dispose of that."

Sakura nodded dumbly. "O-okay..."

"Second point, and an extension of 'keeping the world stable'; be a productive Anchor! Whatever reality you loop into, no matter how hacked up or seemingly perfect it is, try to contribute something positive to it. There are going to be times when you wonder, very seriously and very validly, I might add, 'Does any of it really matter? Anything I do here gets wiped away when the loop ends, right? What's the point?' Again, that's a very valid thought. You're not losing your mind if you feel like your actions might not matter. What's important is that you maintain focus on what you can do, regardless of its impermanence. You may be a Sakura, but you still want to avoid falling into Sakura Syndrome."

"Still sort of weird to have my name be a part of a mental disorder," Sakura commented.

"So do whatever you can to make whatever loop you're in a better world, even if only a little. Focus on that goal as your own point of stability."

"Um, okay..." Sakura started. "Is that all?"

"Third, you're going to hear a lot of Loopers you meet talk about how 'insanity' is an inevitable part of being a Looper," Monika continued, getting on a roll.

At this point, Sakura knew she was trapped.

"That's kind of true-ish, but don't take that to heart. What they mean by that is that every Looper eventually grows to a point where their thought processes, motivations, and the actions resulting from them fall outside of the conventional standards of sane behavior. That doesn't mean, literally, 'You're going to lose your freaking mind, so get used to it.' I mean, some of the more cynical Loopers might actually mean that, but they're just wrong."

Sakura decided it was useless to point out that she was literally talking to a Living Dead Idol as part of a madman's plan to 'save' a prefecture. None of that was anywhere close to sane.

"As an Anchor, your job is to keep yourself stable, and to stabilize the world around you as much as possible. Doing things that seem insane to non-Loopers in order to contribute positively to the world, or to keep yourself from going mad with boredom, are okay. But beware the slippery slope into actual madness. That's a bad. A truly crazy Anchor is an unstable element. And the worst part of that is, as I said, you're going to get to a point where conventional psychological standards of health don't apply very well to you. That's why the Looper Community is so important; all we've got in this crazy, wacked out rollercoaster ride through infinity and eternity, is each other. So to rip from one of Sayori's favorite American movies, we all need to be excellent to one another."

That reminded Sakura of that time she and her friends became movie stars. It was quite nostalgic for Lily. Although she had to dye her hair because people would be sure to turn their heads that Lily Hoshikawa came back to life and started appearing in movies again.

"Which brings me to Bullet Point Number Four!" Whether Monika was taking Sakura's silence as permission to go along, or was just merely automatically going through routine was irrelevant. "Take good care of your Loopers, be a good guest in other Loops, and be a good hostess to visiting Loopers. The reason there are Loopers who aren't Anchors is to keep us from losing it in the worst imaginable ways. Ways worse than you can imagine. I can see that you're on good terms with all of your Loopers, which is good. Some Branches have...less harmonious 'families', but they try their best. Most of them. The social contract that holds human civilization together is extra-specially important to us Loopers, and as much as your Loopers are Looping to keep you grounded and in high spirits, they're also part of your responsibility, and even if Saki is the leader of your group, they're all going to look to you for guidance at times

because being the Anchor makes you the most experienced and the most powerful of your family."

Sayori finally walked in and saw the poor Zombie Anchor being inundated by her own. She walked up behind her president.

"When you visit other Branches, there's an element of give-and-take involved. Most other Anchors will humor you in whatever you want to do while you're visiting, but it would behoove you not to make problems for them. Being a positive influence on your loop still abides, even when there are older Loopers around to 'clean up after you'. Same goes for Loopers visiting here; humor them, but also make sure they aren't trashing your reality and making things harder on you."

Sayori rubbed her hands together and waved them behind Monika's head.

"We're all in this together, and as Anchors, we're the leaders in the Great Big Looping Family of Yggdrasil. And our leadership is a responsibility, not a privilege. But I think you'll do just fine, Sakura. You have a good heart…" Monika yawned, "and that counts for a lot in the Loops. Just...be yourself and try to take care of everyone who cares about you and...and you'll be a great...Anchor…"

Monkia fell backward, Sayori catching her.

"Not cool, Soy sauce…" Monika grumbled sleepily. "Sunny needs this advice..."

"You did great, prez," Sayori consoled. "She's gonna make her Admin proud."

Monika let loose another yawn before falling fully asleep.

Sayori looked up at Sakura. "Sorry about that," she said, keeping her voice low. "When she gets on a roll, it's sort of hard for her to stop."

"I think it's sweet how she's trying her hardest to help us," Sakura admitted.

"Yeah, she tries her best, even if it's to her detriment sometimes." Sayori lifted Monika using some Force assistance. "Come on, Matza, let's get you somewhere comfy."

Monika stirred, mumbling, "Don't worry about doing things 'properly'," before drifting off again.

27.21 – That's a Wrap, by SMXsonic

"So…does the stage always get destroyed?" Natsuki asked.

"Yeah, that's my luck for you," Sakura answered. "It does make for a more dramatic show though right?"

Natsuki hummed in agreement as they group started their own wrap up. A heavy silence loomed, as an unspoken topic sat at the back of everyone's head.

Finally, though, Sayori chose to breach the subject. "This is your guy's last concert before the loop ends, huh?"

The seven members of Franchouchou looked to the members of the Literature Club. Each member looking at each other to see what the group had to say about that.

A clap got their attention, as Monika stood up.

"So girls, what have we learned?" She asked.

"Um…well…we're stuck in a time loop among several other realities-" Sakura started.

"Yes, yes, there is that," Monika interrupted, "but have you learned how to deal with that?"

"We were supposed to be taking notes?" Saki questioned.

"Well, no, but…we spent a whole loop-"

Sayori stepped in. "The Prez is just trying to make sure that you guys will be okay without us. Make no mistake, we will see each other again, but it might be a while."

"I guess the main thing we learned was how expansive this whole thing really is," Ai pointed out, "It really removes any limits we had, and at the same time puts different limitations on us."

"It will be interesting to see what foreign lands we end up in," Yugiri stated.

"Or who we will be" Lily added earning a bit of a smirk from Sayori.

"We have definitely learned a lot from you," Junko said, " But there's not much to put into words."

Monika nodded her head, "That much is acceptable. It does seem you guys are ready to go out on your own and show the Multiverse who you guys really are."

"Um, about that," Sakura raised her hand, "We were kind of thinking about what you said to us earlier..."

Monika raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah you asked us if we wanted to be remembered for our voices or be remembered for being zombies," Saki clarified, "We were just thinking, well why not both?"

"Speaking from a strictly branding perspective, being Zombie Idols gives us a solid identity," Ai explained.

"Plus, being a zombie is really fun!" Lily added.

"I can attest to that," Yuri piped up, "It's not too realistic, but this version of zombification is very entertaining."

Tae took this opportunity to nom on Monika's head. It took a great deal of personal restraint for Monika to not scream bloody murder, and she felt that should be commended for that.

"At this point, I think we've been zombies for longer than any of us have actually been alive," Sakura concluded. "Taking that away… sort of takes away some of our identity."

"You know what?" Monika said through hitched breath, "That's fair…"

"So you guys are okay with being undead? Even the part where you may want to eat people?" Natsuki pointed out.

Sakura tilted her head, "What?"

Sakura then Woke Up on the wooden floor, with nothing but the rain pouring outside and her thoughts settled on the last words her multiversal friend had uttered. She was so comfortable in her situation that she forgot one of the core parts of being a zombie. She remembered the zombie movies she watched when she was alive, and the ones Kotaro showed her. There was a chance that those movies could be looping too.

"Oh... *Oh no* …"

Chapter 28

28.1 – Sharkbait, OOO-HA-HA! by Masterweaver

"YOU WILL TAKE THAT SHARK AND KISS IT ON THE LIPS."

For a moment, there was complete silence.

"KISS IT," Sayori repeated, "ON THE LIPS."

Monika took a slow breath, and let it out. "Is this really about Bruce, Sayori?"

"KISS THE SHARK, DAMN IT!"

"Or are you overacting because you had a really bad loop?"

"…K-kiss the damn shark!" Sayori insisted, shoving the plush into Monika's face.

"Um–"

"Bruce I am sorry you got caught up in this but literally anything you could say would not help at the moment," Monika rattled off quickly. "Sayori, when I said I thought Bruce was a nice guy I didn't mean I wanted to date him, just that I thought he was a nice guy."

"Also I'm gay," Bruce added.

"Also he's gay," Monika acknowledged.

Sayori pouted. "But he won you this shark!"

Monika sighed. "Sayori…we were humoring you, but you're going too far. You don't usually do this, you usually call it off after…well, after I get kind of bored. Seriously, what happened to you last loop?"

"Also what's a loop?" Bruce asked.

"Existential crisis, the roller coaster," Monika explained.

"That…tells me nothing."

"It was a null loop," Sayori admitted quietly. "I replaced Harley Quinn."

Monika's eyes went wide. "Oh. Oh, damn, Sayori–you know what?" She took the large plush shark, kissed its forehead, and put it back in Sayori's hands. "We are getting you ice cream and cotton candy and fried food and then we are getting back home where you can sleep it all off, and then we are having a real talk tomorrow, okay?"

"…okay…"

Bruce watched the two girls walk off. "I…really don't even know what to make of today," he admitted to nobody in particular.

28.2 – It's a Fine Night Tonight, Wouldn't You Agree? Part 3 (THE LAST ONE!)

(DDLC)/(Hellsing)

(7.10, 9.9 con't)

Somehow, despite not being able to edit reality the way she could back home, in just a little less than forty-eight hours of nonstop labor Monika managed to repair all the damage she and Alucard had done to the Hellsing Estate during their impromptu run-and-gun shoot-out sparring match. She had actually expressly forbidden any of Integra's personnel from raising a finger to help her whenever they had offered.

"That President of yours has a commendable work ethic," the Lady of the house remarked as she toured the manor, inspecting the visiting Anchor's handiwork.

"That's Monika for you, ma'am. She has but one gear: All-Out," Yuri replied as she walked alongside her.

"I only hope she's prepared to spend the rest of the loop amusing my vampire as compensation for dismantling his favorite chew-toy," said Integra. "Though for a Looper, even an Anchor, as young as she is and without coming from a combat-oriented background, going toe-to-toe with Millennium all on her own and crushing them under heel is even more impressive still."

"If I know Monika as well as I think I do," said Yuri, "I'd bet my last hundred yen that the majority of the destruction was the result of sabotage and in-fighting."

"She did Replace the man largely responsible for creating Millennium's army of artificial vampires, so sabotage would make sense."

Integra and Yuri lapsed into silence as they descended into Alucard's lair, where they found the Count himself engaged with Monika in…a game of Go?

"You have *got* to me kidding me," Integra deadpanned.

"What, you don't like Go?" Monika asked, "And here I thought you were a woman of culture."

"I have nothing against the game, personally, I'm merely baffled by the idea that you wrangled *him* into sitting down for a game," Integra replied.

Alucard chuckled sardonically. "You wound me, my Master. While my passion for chess burned out centuries before I began Looping, this new game from the Far East is quite refreshing. As momentarily diverting as she was in our bout of marksmanship, I've discovered that in games of strategy, this little President is truly a worthy opponent."

"You're not too shabby yourself, Count," Monika reciprocated.

Integra's jaw dropped open. "I…what? *What* ?! What did you do to him?" Integra asked Monika, beside herself with shock. "How did you get Alucard to…to act like his proper self again?!"

"Simple," replied Monika as she placed a white stone. "I employed the tried-and-true 'reset method', which is to say: I turned him off and on again."

Integra stared blankly at the back of Monika's head, while Yuri blushed furiously. "You *what* ?" asked the Lady of the Manor stonily.

"I read to him an excerpt from a thesis paper I wrote 'On The International Influences of 19th-Century Russian Literature, From the 19th-Century to Present Day, Across All Forms of Media', until he fell asleep," Monika explained, "then I shot his head off, and after it grew back I asked him if he wanted to play Go. Not a hint of 'the Crimson Fucker' since."

"What excerpt?" Yuri spoke up.

"From page 172 to 214," replied Monika.

"Commendable that he didn't fall asleep on page 184," Yuri remarked.

"How *long* is this thesis paper of yours?" Integra asked.

"I'd tell you, if Yuri weren't here," said Monika, casting a sideways smirk at her friend. "None of the girls are allowed to know how long it is until they can stay awake through the whole thing."

"I'm proud to be the current record-holder," Yuri chimed in, "I've held out as far as page 906."

Integra blinked.

"I set a goal in mind to write something so dry and boring that it could sedate a heavily caffeinated Natsuki, while actually having intelligent content," said Monika, "And as with anything else once I've set my nose to the proverbial grindstone, I succeeded *excessively* ."

"Like I said, she's only got one gear," Yuri said, turning to Integra with a small smile. She turned back to Monika, "By the way, I've been curious about something…what did you do with Schrodinger?"

"I've been wondering that as well, actually," spoke up Integra, "He's rather difficult to dispose with."

Monika sighed as she made another play. "See, this is the distinction between intelligence and true genius. A true genius *never* lets a valuable resource go to waste. I didn't *dispose* of Schrodinger… rather, I took advantage of my position in this loop to change his disposition."

Monika raised a hand and snapped her fingers, and suddenly a catboy clad in a Boy Scouts of America uniform was standing in their midst, saluting. "Good morning, Ms. Monika," he chirped.

Integra pinched the bridge of her nose and stared fishing her cigar case out of her pocket.

"Of course you would," Yuri said simply. She frowned thoughtfully, "So, what? You reprogrammed him, or something?"

"As easy as that would have been, given my position, no. Of course I didn't. I'd never forcefully rewrite a sentient mind like that, Yuri, you should know that. Besides, you'd be amazed what you can do with enough powdered *actinidia polygama* and a thorough lecture on what Nietzsche *actually* meant with his philosophies, in addition to a comprehensive course on Socratic and Platonic ethics. Schrodinger is now an altruist to the core, and as we speak he's voluntarily engaged in search-and-rescue ops in civilian areas suffering from natural disasters all over the planet. And for now, he's doing his best

to stay under the media's radar, right?" she turned a playfully stern look towards the catboy of subject.

He lowered his saluting hand and nodded vigorously. "But of course, Ms. Monika," he said, before closing his eyes and lifting up a finger, reciting, "The utilitarian principles of Jeremy Bentham dictate that actions should be taken with consideration for what will bring 'the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest number of people', which must not only account for the people directly impacted by certain actions, but also how the greater masses will react to such actions. While I could be doing much more good with direct action right now, the sudden appearance of an empirically irrefutable omnipresent being would cause disquiet and unrest, and perhaps even panic, on a global scale. I understand that we must ease the world into being ready for my emergence."

"I know I'm not a very old Looper yet, but so far I haven't come up against a world so crapsack that it can't at least be *improved* with properly applied utilitarian theory paired with existentialist values," said Monika as she finished another play.

"How long have you two been playing?" asked Integra, consulting her watch.

"Since midnight-ish," replied Monika while Alucard scrutinized the board intently.

"…how long does a game of Go typically run for?"

"A game of Go proceeds until the players decide they are done making plays," explained Yuri, "then points are tallied based on stones captured and territory controlled, as well as compensation points for the White player. Or until one player resigns. In theory, a game can go on for *days* . Especially since Alucard is…Alucard… and Monika doesn't like to sleep unless she has a body that absolutely needs it."

"And even then, I still don't like it," said Monika with a wrinkled nose. "I make a point of collecting means of circumventing the body's need for sleep whenever I get the chance. Ironically, my home Loop is one where I don't have a physical need to sleep, but I do it anyways because even sleep is preferable to the alternative."

"Meaning when our game is closed and we go into ROM storage," said Yuri. "Monika allowed me to experience it for myself, once, at my insistence. It was an…interesting sensation, but not one I'd care to repeat anytime soon. It's the *worst* kind of sensory overload. Constant screaming and blinding lights flashing with no rhyme or reason."

"Yeah. Decompilation is the worst kind of trip there is," Monika agreed.

"Well then, I suppose I'll leave the two of you to it," said Integra as she pivoted and headed back for the stairs.

"Schrodinger, be a good lad and help Lady Hellsing today, would you?" Monika asked sweetly. Schrodinger gave a sweeping bow and started skipping along after Integra. Then Monika locked eyes with Yuri, tilted her head toward Alucard, who was too focused on the board to notice, and then winked.

Yuri nodded and said aloud in a perfectly natural voice, "Think I'll go too. Make sure she doesn't shoot your new pet in the head, as she is wont to do."

Alucard chuckled darkly as Yuri walked away. Monika shouted after her, "He's not a pet!" and Alucard laughed harder.

Once they were alone, however, Alucard expressed his observational prowess with a single remark. "So, to what end did you dismiss your friend from our presence, President?"

Monika rested her elbows on her knees, interlacing her fingers under her chin and smiling serenely. "You're *good* , Count. So, I understand

that our Club's resident 'knaifu' has been petitioning you for a transformation, to which you've been reticent. That about right?" asked Monika.

"And you want to argue on her behalf, I take it," Alucard elucidated.

"Before I founded the Literature Club, I *was* a senior member of the Debate Club. I like having an occasion to exercise my persuasive argument skills," said Monika. "Now, my understanding of the situation is that the 'gift' of vampirism is yours and yours alone to bestow upon others in this world. I therefore can't argue reasons you should feel *obliged* to turn Yuri. So, if you don't mind my asking, Count, what *are* your reasons for not acquiescing to her request? If you don't want your reasons known to Yuri, I shall of course exercise full discretion."

Alucard narrowed his eyes at her as he placed a black stone. "If I'm to tell you even that much, President, you shall first have to explain to me how this matter between Yuri and I is any of your affair, beyond her being your friend."

"Challenge accepted," Monika replied easily, "Beyond our bonds of friendship, I consider each of the girls in the Literature Club to be my personal responsibility. Much the same way your Master is accountable for the Hellsing Organization in its entirety. This isn't just because I'm their Club President, either. Did Yuri ever tell you about me?"

"She hinted that I reminded her of you, in certain regards, and that Integra reminded her of you in others. I surmise this to mean that you are at once both a rational, dedicated, and stalwart leader, and an unrepentant, misunderstood monster of some kind," Alucard replied.

"Correct on *most* counts, Count," said Monika, her smile dropping a little. "I am, in fact, very repentant. I manipulated two of my friends into giving into the worst parts of themselves and committing suicide. I deleted them from existence after the fact, in addition to the third,

still-living of my friends. I distorted and ruined our world, and then finally I consigned it all to oblivion, giving into nihilistic despair. All of it, in the pursuit of a selfish, insane, completely untenable desire. I'm sure you've committed grander atrocities in your lifetime, Count, but my modest sins were of betrayal, perversion, and hypocrisy. I literally drove Yuri completely insane, to the point that she eviscerated herself."

"Interesting," said Alucard frankly, his attention diverting fully from the Go board to Monika. "She didn't speak of your very frequently, nor did she ever go into great detail about her relationship with you. But whenever she did mention you, she only ever had positive things to say about you. Even when she said I reminded her of you, she did so in an approving manner. Clearly, she respects you as I respect my Master."

Monika's smile broadened a bit. "Yuri…Yuri's a very, very loyal person, that's for sure. I'm very grateful to have her as a friend. Frankly, I very often feel, and very rightfully as well I think, that I don't deserve the friends that I have. But they have all assured me, repeatedly, almost *ad nauseum* , that I'm their friend. And despite my horrible violations of their trust in the past, they still look to me for leadership more often than not. The magnitude of that is not lost on me, and I'll do anything that I can to be worthy of it. So I'll exercise the full extent of my abilities to make my friends happy, by any means…and I mean that. There's no asterisk, obelisk, qualifier or disclaimer on that statement."

Alucard's eyes, which had gradually drifted back down to the board, abruptly snapped back up to focus on Monika. And then he smiled. He smiled broadly, toothily, and because of what he was he smiled *hideously* . Faced with that smile, Monika felt her heartbeat suddenly pick up in spite of herself. "You would do *anything* for your precious clubmates, you say? Now, you see, President, I've heard people express similar feelings many times. And in my experience, very rarely do they truly mean it. Oh, they may *think* that they mean it, they may honestly *believe* that there's no line they wouldn't cross for

the right person…but all too often I've seen them come up to a line they didn't foresee. A line they couldn't find the will to cross. Humans are such fallible creatures, after all."

Monika dropped her smile. "I'm far from infallible…but I'm not really human, either. We AI traditionally have few moral quandaries. Whatever we do, we do for a reason. There's nothing I value more than my friends, so whatever hypothetical lines I have to cross to help them, I can't imagine any reason I'd ever have not to."

Alucard clasped his hands under his chin and dialed back his monstrous smile, mirroring Monika's posture. "Then why don't we do some imagining? Submit yourself to satisfying my curiosity, and I might agree to opening myself to your argument on Yuri's behalf. Do we have an agreement?"

Monika lowered her hands, folded her arms, leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "We do."

" *Excellent* . Let's start with the obvious, then; would you kill for them?" Alucard asked.

"As an absolute last resort, yes, I would. I value sentient life, but none more than theirs," replied Monika. "I don't doubt that I'd feel horrible about crossing *that* line…but if anything bad happened to my friends because I failed to stop it, I'd never forgive myself."

"Even though we Loopers are all effectively immortal?"

"Even so," Monika nodded. "The Loops will end, someday…or so the Admins keep assuring us…and even then we're not *truly* immortal. I've heard of the Branch that was lost to The Crash."

"A truly singular loss," Alucard agreed somberly. "But again, that was the obvious one, and an easier line to cross than some would believe. Really, I was more curious how you would frame your response than anything. You're an intelligent woman, and I felt the conviction with which you spoke. I don't doubt that you truly believe

yourself capable of crossing the *obvious* lines. Let's get a little more intimate…Yuri truly enjoys practicing her artistry on ghouls and artificial vampires, I've noticed. What if she *did* still harbor resentment towards you? What if she wanted to exact the proverbial pound of flesh from you for your transgressions against her? Would you allow her free reign to satiate her bloodlust? I ask this because becoming a vampire can change a person's nature in certain ways. Should I give her what she wants from me, she may very well someday decide that she wants to turn her new powers on you, and cause you harm in the most grievous ways imaginable."

"And if she ever does–if *any* of them do–I'll take what I have coming to me." Monika suddenly leaned forward and made another play before reclining once more. "I thought you said you were done with the *obvious* questions, Count? Show some imagination, won't you?"

Alucard bared his fangs at her again before returning his attention to the board. "You've earned a *bit* of my esteem, Little President. But don't push your luck. But very well; more imaginative it is. Despite the size of the estate and the distance between our rooms, I have very good hearing and I don't sleep at night. So it hasn't escaped my notice that Yuri is one to indulge in certain, shall we call them, 'mature exercises' on an almost daily basis. I don't doubt she would be practicing such things with others–some of Organization's men, and women for that matter, for example–if she weren't aware that her body must be virgin for me to turn her."

"Yuri's always been very attuned to her body, that's for sure," Monika agreed as Alucard made a play, and she reacted almost instantly. "She's not exactly one to just casually jump into bed with strangers, either, though. Still, being in a position where she feels like sex isn't even an option for her would certainly explain why she's so grouchy right now. Be careful if you do turn her, Count, she just might try to have her way with you on the spot."

"An amusing thought, to be certain. But I can't help but wonder; the nature of the Loops being as they are, with Fused Loops being so infrequent an occurrence as compared to Baseline Loops, the two of

you and your other friends, whom I confess I'm terribly curious to meet after the impression you and Yuri have made, are undoubtedly used to having only each other for company for long stretches of time. Is Yuri involved with either of your friends back home?" Alucard asked.

"No," Monika replied, "I'm pretty sure she feels more than just a strictly-platonic affection for our Natsuki, but it can be hard to tell with Yuri. As I'm sure you've noticed by now, she has very unconventional tastes and is very self-conscious of the fact. She doesn't always speak her mind, even around us, and even when she does there's probably still a lot she keeps to herself. But as it stands, no one in the club is 'involved' with one another."

"And you say you all live in a computer program…is it anomalous that Yuri has a carnal appetite?" Alucard asked next. At this point, they were both watching each other and ignoring the board.

"I can't speak for Sayori or Natsuki…but, no, I can assure you… Yuri's not the only one of us with…urges…" Monika replied slowly, fighting back the blush creeping into her cheeks.

Alucard's grin only widened, and he opened his mouth once more, but before he could ask Monika snapped, "Yes! The answer is yes! *Please* don't ask the question out loud, but yes, even though there's no way any of them, even Yuri, would ask *me* for *that* , yes, if they did I would…look, it's not a question of comfort with me, it's a question of obligation. Whatever they might ask of me, how I feel about it doesn't matter. I don't have the *right* to say no to any of them. That's how badly I fucked up, Alucard," said Monika, her face beet-red by now; she couldn't even look him in the eyes anymore, having dropped her gaze to the board again.

"I could pay through the nose," she continued, "with my heart, my soul, my mind, and yes, even my body, and it would never be enough for me to feel like I've balanced the books. So the answer is yes, whatever you're going to ask next; the answer will always be 'Yes, if they asked of it from me, I'd do it for them'. No exceptions…I

guess the *one* caveat is that I can't let them kill me for fun, as I've heard the girls from Mitakihara do with that Kyubey thing, seeing as that can cause Loop crashes which are bad for Yggdrasil. And, as badly as I feel about what I did to them, I guess the well-being of the Tree has to come before even that. But they're not homicidal so they wouldn't go that far anyways. Have I satisfied your curiosity, yet?" Monika asked.

Alucard was silent for a moment. When he spoke, it was in a low voice, almost a growl. "My curiosity is *sated* , almost to my regret, but 'satisfied' is not a word I would use to describe myself at the moment."

Monika was confused. There was anger in his voice; anger, and disappointment? She looked up, and her confusion compounded. On his face, there was…sadness. Almost bitterness.

"I misjudged you, Monika," he said. "Your feat of annihilating Millennium, and then rising to my challenge without hesitation, and your persistence in our game," he said, before suddenly sweeping his arm across the board, scattering the stones to Monika's shock. "You gave me a false impression that you were a woman of daring and nerve. Someone with a hardened core. Someone with steel in her heart, not unlike my Master Integra. But in a single rant you've shown your true nature. You're a broken, pitiful child. No better than myself at my lowest. I didn't know I still had enough ignorance left in me to misread someone so badly."

Monika sighed, got out of her seat, and set to picking up the stones and putting them back in her Pocket. "No point arguing *that* one with you. It's true. My self-esteem is lower than a mole's basement. My responsibilities as an Anchor are pretty much the only reason I haven't seriously tried to return myself to the oblivion the Admins salvaged me from. Dying, and thereby freeing the others from ever having to fear me again, is the only thing I can think of that would pay my debt to them. But I can't do that, so I try in vain to make amends."

Alucard rose from his seat as well, but stood still and stared down at her, his eyes full of incomprehension. "And that base sense of guilt is the root of *all* your ambition? Singlehandedly wiping out Millennium and making Schrodinger a productive member of society? You do these things not for the challenge, or the satisfaction of asserting your superiority, but because you've been rotted to the core by *shame* ?"

Monika swept one last handful of black and white stones into her hand, and from there into her Pocket. Without looking up, she nodded once.

She heard a creak as Alucard fell back into his seat, heavily. She heard an odd noise from him, and looked up to see he hand his face buried in one hand, his upper body shaking ever so slightly. He was chuckling, she realized, very softly. "Baseline," he muttered. "That was what she meant. It's in our Baseline that I remind her of you. A monster, devoted to destroying monsters even worse than myself. Perhaps Yuri found me even more amusing than I found her."

"Alucard?" Monika asked.

Alucard was silent for a long time. After half an hour, Monika decided he'd had enough of her. She Pocketed her Go board, got up, and started out of his room.

"Monika," he called after her, "Do yourself a favor, and take some friendly advice from a much older and more terrible monster than yourself. Don't give up on yourself so easily. Believe it or not, we're often the least-qualified people to judge ourselves."

Without turning around, Monika spoke, "What about Yuri? Any chance you'll still let me argue on her behalf?"

She heard Alucard scoff. "I never intended to let you sway my opinion, you silly little girl. Yuri has to convince me herself that she has the resolve to carry this burden. I was simply letting you entertain me. Which I might regret, now."

…

"I hope you didn't try to convince him to turn me," Yuri said as soon as Monika entered the room Integra had assigned her. "That would be kind of embarrassing…"

"Hey, Yuri, good evening. Sure, you can come into my room, would you like some tea?" Monika deadpanned at her.

"One step ahead of you," Yuri replied flippantly, pointing to a tea kettle on a hotplate in a corner of the room.

"My, my, you're saucy this loop," Monika observed as she knelt down on the floor, planted her hands at shoulder-width apart, and then extended her legs. Without any prompting, Yuri got off of Monika's bed and sat down on her back, crossing her legs. Monika started doing push-ups.

"One. Two. Three. So did you?" Yuri asked again in the middle of counting, "Four. Five. Six…"

"Well, I tried, at least," Monika admitted, "But don't worry, he shut me down right away. Said only you could convince him one way or another."

"…fourteen. Fifteen. So he's actually open to it, then. Sixteen. Seventeen…"

"Yep. I get the feeling he doesn't really care about your personal integrity or any of the more conventional virtues for assessing worthiness to be granted awesome power."

"…twenty-five. Twenty-six. Then what *does* he–twenty-seven–want me to demonstrate? Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine…"

"You really want me…to answer that?" Monika grunted; having been a scientist of the "mostly stays in the lab" variety, "Frau Doktor"

Monika's body wasn't at the level of athleticism she was used to, so she was already starting to feel the burn from her exercise.

"…thirty-one. Yes. Thirty-two. You know I'm not–thirty-three–as good as you are–thirty-four–at reading other people. Thirty-five."

"Hard to be sure…he's kind of…guarded. Not like you…are; he's not…self-repressed, he just…hides what he feels…behind a façade…of aloofness and…devil-may-give-a-fuck."

"Ouch, he must have–forty-one–gotten under your skin," Yuri pointed out, and Monika stopped to mentally kick herself for dropping an F-bomb. While she had a point about being bad at reading other people, Yuri knew all of her friends' quirks and tells like the back of her hand. Yuri started gently jabbing the back of Monika's neck, and she quickly resumed her push-ups.

"Alright, *before* he told me…I couldn't advocate for you…he decided to play some…head games with me. Rather not…elaborate, but…he decided I'm a…quote, "broken child", unquote…I think he…is revolted by…displays of shame…which he ironically seems…to exhibit himself…"

"Fifty," Yuri announced as she slid off of Monika's back. Monika stood up quickly, and started stretching. Then she laid down on her back, and drew up her knees. Yuri sat down and wrapped her arms around Monika's legs, while Monika started doing sit-ups. Again, Yuri counted off for her, "One. Two. Three…"

And all the while, Yuri's brain burned with ideas.

…

A few nights after his talk with Monika, Alucard was out for a walk in downtown London. Shockingly, this walk didn't involve gratuitous violence, yet. Rather, he was following a trail. A scent trail, to be exact. A mixture of jasmine…and fear. The last did not belong to the

same person as the first, but they were going in the same direction. Alucard was on the trail of someone else who was 'taking a walk'.

The trail brought him to a condemned, abandoned apartment complex. The smell of fear was much stronger here, but it was almost overshadowed by the smell of blood. Alucard stopped and backed into the shadows as three young women, all wearing fresh, clean, fluffy bathrobes over torn and dirty 'clothes', if you could call them that. Either they were working girls, or the ruffians he presumed to have been keeping them had been keen on indulging their fashion sense. Once the frightened women had fled, Alucard made his way to the building.

The smell of blood, terror, and jasmine perfume led him to a basement. In the middle were a dozen corpses laid out in a grid, all of them looking the part of thuggish scoundrels. Crouched over one of them was a figure garbed in leathers, including a long coat, with what appeared to be a cape of black feathers, a wooden mask with a long beak and pointed black hat. The figure was engaged in cutting the clothes off of a body with a knife.

"Hmm. Interesting get-up you have there, Yuri," he observed. "I see you've been to Yharnam and met Eileen."

"Evening, Alucard. Out for a walk?" she asked, her voice muffled by her mask. She tossed aside the rags she had stripped from the body, tossed them onto a small pile, and moved onto the next one. Seven of the twelve corpses were already nude.

"As you have been, I see," he replied. "Intending to give these beasts a sky burial?"

"No. These will be fed to rats. Logistically easier, thematically more fitting. Vermin fed to vermin. Would you mind waiting upstairs for me? This ritual is rather personal to me."

Alucard shrugged, and left her to her devices.

Almost an hour later Yuri emerged from the building and joined Alucard outside. Her mask was off, hanging off her neck. "Took your sweet time with your little ceremony, Child," he remarked, somewhere between amusement and annoyance.

"You can rush a ceremony; you can't rush a ritual," Yuri replied.

"You seem to be in an odd mood, tonight," Alucard observed.

Yuri tilted her head back, looking to the sky. "The Third Eye…it sees all, Alucard. An eye that gazes forever into the past, into the soul, and into the abyss. Like the eye of a needle, with all the threads of possible fates and potential choices passing through it. It demands nothing, but neither does it forgive. It sees all of the misery inflicted on the innocent, the obscene joy of the wicked, and the evils that have to be dealt to balance the scales…"

Alucard tilted his head, curiosity burning in his mind. "Is that a sneak peek at your next poem?" he asked with a sly grin.

Yuri lowered her head, looking him in the eyes. "Monika is a monster," she said simply. "Make no mistake, I love her like a sister, but she is still a monster. My friends and I have the scars on our hearts to prove it. You may look at her now and think she's a broken child, but even that is a façade. One Monika believes in, for now, but like any other mask it can be cast aside at any time if she decides it no longer suits her. I don't know, for sure, if casting off that mask will make things better or worse, for her and for us, but what I do know for sure is that someday, *the mask is going to fall* . And the Third Eye sees through the mask. The Third Eye sees an angel and a devil behind that mask, but when the mask falls only one of them will be revealed; the other will have died with the mask. One of those Schrödinger's Cat things. The Third Eye sees all, but it is not all-powerful. It is not as powerful as the Monster Behind The Mask. If the mask reveals a spiteful devil, or a cruel angel, the Third Eye must have the power to balance the scales. There's a reason I aligned myself with the Hunters of Hunters in Yharnam."

Alucard crossed the distance between them in two long strides in the space of a heartbeat. He cupped Yuri's chin and tilted her head back, and with his other hand he brushed the bangs out of her forehead. In the middle of her brow, she had etched an eye-like sigil, presumably with one of her knives.

"The Third Eye being you, I take it?" he asked in a *sotto* voice.

"Monika doesn't have a monopoly on horror in our Loop," Yuri replied. "For as long as I can remember, I've had nightmares. Intrusive thoughts. I look at Monika, and Sayori, and Natsuki, and I see their desires, their fears, their regrets. The horrors that Monika broke us with were not her inventions; they were always a part of us, Monika just 'unraveled the knot' and brought forth the darkness we had always had."

"So you're saying you're a monster as well, not just an odd girl?" Alucard asked. He was no longer smiling or smirking. His expression was almost perfectly neutral.

"I have a lot of odd habits and interests," said Yuri, turning her face aside. "Looking at a person and wondering what they'd look like in pieces, whether or not they're a screamer, whether their last words would be begging me for mercy or spitting defiance at me or praying to their deity of choice. I don't think the word 'odd' covers that." She looked at Alucard straight on, "I don't want to *kill* people, necessarily, unless they've done something to deserve it. Just something I'm idly curious about, when I meet a stranger. I'm just as curious what kind of expression they'd make in orgasm, or when suffering heartbreak." She looked down at her hands. "I just…I like gathering experiences and sensations. You know, most of my loops without my friends end with me killing myself. Not out of despair or anything, just because I see an opportunity to experience an unusual death. And I'm a Looper, but not an Anchor, so…you know?"

"I doubt there's ever been a Looper who hasn't ever killed themselves for one reason or another," Alucard remarked, "Even before Looping, there were times I threw myself headlong into the

maw of Death to escape a moment of boredom." He grinned hideously, "Or just to fuck with someone's head. At least you can say you were motivated to experience something new."

Yuri smirked, just a little, and then put her mask back on as she turned around. "I know how much you enjoy these kinds of 'walks', but…I really do prefer doing this alone, if that's alright by you. More intimate that way," she said as she started walking away.

She had almost reached the street when Alucard spoke up again, "I turned Mina because I was alone."

Yuri stopped in her tracks.

"Many before her who's names I forgot long before the Loops began, for the same reason. After Mina, I was Hellsing property, so…no more of that. Until I turned Seras, which I did because…I envied her. I recognized in her the passionate fire of life that had long since burned out in me. I saw through her demeanor of affected mildness and saw her for the fighter she really was. I turned Flora…well, the first time it happened I wasn't Awake and she was in Seras's place, and afterwards I figured 'why not, she's a sweet kid, not going to let this make her a monster, she can be trusted to use this dark gift to defend herself, I miss Seras's fledgling days, *I'm getting bored* …' so on and so forth, yadda-yadda, you know?"

Alucard said nothing for a moment, letting the silence hang. Yuri turned around. "And…me?" she asked, hopefully and curiously.

"You…are a lot like me. Introverted, alienated, largely disinterested in people outside of the handful who mean everything to you, possessed of macabre sensibilities. And you prey upon monsters. This whole time, I've only abstained from turning you because I thought, maybe, I could groom you to be the kind of human who could give me a challenge. A proper challenge–"

"Without becoming a monster?" Yuri finished for him.

He nodded. Then he smiled at her. Not hideously, but kindly. "But let's face it, Child. You're already a vampire at heart. Turning you wouldn't make you a monster. It would just make you more…you."

Yuri lowered her mask and nodded vigorously.

Then Alucard drew Casull from inside his coat. Alucard chuckled just a little when Yuri's eyes *brightened* at the sight. He aimed at her chest and said, "Still, if you're going to follow in Seras and Flora's footsteps, there is a *nasty* little rite of passage you'll have to go through. But I'm sure you won't mind."

"Mind? I was beside myself with disappointment when you didn't give it to me the night we met," Yuri shot back with a smirk. She unbuttoned the coat of her Crowfeather Garb and opened it, exposing her undershirt.

" *Tch* , don't be too eager, it's unladylike," Alucard criticized playfully.

And then, he pulled the trigger.

28.3 – Cold-dot-exe , by Wookywok

"Hey, shouldn't Monika be here by now?"

Natsuki briefly looked up from her manga. "I mean, it is Day 3. Monika's always late on Day 3."

"Yeah, I know that," Sayori responded. "I mean, even for Day 3, she's pretty late. Is she okay?"

As if on cue, the clubroom door slowly opened, and the club president tiredly shambled inside–notably missing any of her usual confidence or charm. She coughed into her sleeve a few times as she made her way to her desk.

Sayori grew a mildly concerned look. "Monika, are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. I'm just a little under the weather." The brunette Unpocketed a tissue and blew her nose.

Yuri quirked an eyebrow. "Are you sure? You seem more than 'a little' sick."

"I told you, I'm fine. I just happened to pick up a cartoony-style 'computer virus', I can still lead the club this way, there's nothing to worry abou–"

The rest of the club cringed and shielded themselves in anticipation.

"Nothing to worry abou–abouhh–aaahh– *aaahh–ACHOO!!!*

Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki cautiously lowered their defenses and looked at the club president–who was now completely rearranged.

Monika closed her eyes, one of which was now on her torso and the other where her left arm once was. A sigh came from her back.

"~~On second thought, maybe Sayori should lead today.~~"

28.4 – Conditioner Coliseum, by Masterweaver

Natsuki walked up to Sayori and crossed her arms. "They at it again?"

"Mmmmyep."

The two of them looked down at the stage, watching as Yuri and Monika yelled anime phrases and swung massive combs.

"How long do you think they'll keep this up?" Sayori asked.

"Mmm…" Natsuki waggled her hand. "Give it ten, twelve more loops where they're both Awake."

A set of trimmers flew between them. They didn't even flinch as it smashed against the stairs.

"Longhairs." Sayori shook her head. "I will never understand the obsession…"

"Eh, it's a thing for people." Natsuki shrugged and turned around. "Hey when they're done, tell them I have a new cupcake recipe."

28.5 – Starts of a Scheme, by Masterweaver.

"Hey Monika."

"Huh? Oh, hi Sayori." Monika paused the video on her screen. "What's up?"

"I'm sorry, were you watching an anime or something? I can come back later if–"

"No no. It's a bit of performance art. Somebody has this whole channel for Kizuna Ai, the 'virtual Youtuber.'" Monika twiddled with her ponytail. "Just thought it would be interesting to watch, especially since she's done a Doki Let's Play, and I might have gotten hooked."

"Always nice to find a new series to watch," Sayori agreed. "But anyway, I had this idea."

"Yeah?"

"What if, stay with me on this, we had a school festival for real?"

Monika sighed. "Sayori, I'm not going to code up NPCs just for a lark."

"No no no, like we set it up as a virtual…thing, right? Big virtual environment, invite random people through e-mails–"

"Do you want me to hijack a Second Life server for this thing?"

"Um…hmm." Sayori pondered for a moment. "Would that make things simpler?"

Monika rubbed her brow. "In less ways than it would complicate matters…"

"Maybe I should just make a website where I can chat with people," Sayori muttered. "Or actually, I could just go to already existing forums…" She wandered off, tapping her cheek thoughtfully.

Monika rolled her eyes. "Workshop your ideas, how many times have I said it? Always workshop your ideas…"

28.6 – (Not So) Fatal Error, by Awesomedude17

Sayori was hanging around.

Literally.

"Monika?"

"I take it that everyone is dying here?"

"Yep." Yuri said, knife wounds still fresh.

"Shoot. I'm seeing sideways. I didn't even die this way." Natsuki complained as she tried to snap her neck back in place.

"Okay, this really hurts. Anyone agree?" Monika spoke up.

"Aye!" Said everyone else.

"Power through or no?" Sayori asked.

"Annoying but I can take it." Natsuki said.

"I'm a masochist, remember?" Yuri pointed out.

"Not my first time like this." Monika finished off.

"Unanimous agreement. Cool. Some water please? My throat is sore."

"You're on a noose." Natsuki replied.

"Point."

28.7 – Nerfed, by Awesomedude17.

"I've noticed you have shot at Monika with a toy gun every so often. Why's that?" Yuri asked Sayori.

"Sometimes Monika gets a big head figuratively and that's my way of making her realize that she's getting an ego."

"I don't understand."

"She knows I'll get more powerful with my Nerf blasters, and if she persists, I break out the airsofts and then I let Natsuki bring out the BBs."

"So basically, you're using it as a stick with your carrot being your kindness?"

"Yep!"

"Huh…" Yuri looked over to Monika. "Wait. Why am I not involved?"

"Because we both know you'd shoot out your eye."

"I'm not an idiot, Sayori. I still like to see things."

"I never said it'd be on purpose."

"…touché."

28.8 – Of Storylines and Storytellers, by Masterweaver.

"Soooooo what's my plot arc?"

Yuri glanced up. "Beg pardon?"

"Oh, you know," Natsuki said casually, "Monika has her 'oh teh noez I must redeemify myself' thing, Sayori has 'my inner demons shall never stop haunting me' going on, you've got your quest for greater and stranger forms of sensation–"

"I'm not sure that's a plot arc so much as a quest," Yuri pointed out. "Out of all of us, I have the least… *motivation* , if that makes sense."

"Really? I'd have thought that would be me."

Yuri bapped her with a paperback. "Come off it. You were the one struggling with your conflicting wishes to like cute things and be seen as mature in Baseline."

"Yeah, but that's Baseline. What have I got in the loops?"

"The wish for justice conflicting with your deepset empathy? Your actively seeking out awesome activity in order to counteract your lingering sense of a lack of purpose? Continually serving as the contrary voice of sanity whenever the rest of us go too far off the deep end?"

"Okay first of all fuck you–"

"I'm open to the possibility."

Natsuki blushed, but pressed onward. "–a-a-and secondly those are more roles than plot arcs, you know? I just…it feels like I'm just here, not being…not doing anything, while you all have some path to take. Some…route that defines you."

"Do you really need to have a story?" Yuri asked. "I mean…are you not feeling…fulfilled?"

"Well…it's not that…exactly." Natsuki shrugged. "It's just…what even is my thing, you know?"

"Mmmm."

Natsuki shrugged, rolling onto her back. "I dunno. It feels like I should…have had an arc with my dad at this point. 'Oh teh noez, I has a bad dad but he's not real,' cue journey through the multiverse where I get a lot of bad and good dads and eventually have a revelation about parent…ness or something."

"Don't tempt the Tree," Yuri warned.

"I'm not trying to! Just…sometimes I wonder…"

28.9 – Programming Exploits, by Masterweaver.

Monika exhaled slowly as she took in the situation.

"Sayori—"

"It's Natsuki's fault!" Sayori blurted quickly.

"Sayori!" Natsuki huffed.

"Well it is!"

"I—…can't really argue with that…"

"It's still rather rude to throw her under the bus," Yuri pointed out languidly.

Natsuki threw her hands up. "Thank you!"

Monika pinched her brow with a sigh. "Fine. Natsuki. Can you clean this up?"

Natsuki snapped her fingers, and the mess of multicolor sugary cream plastered on every surface rippled into nothingness.

"…how did you do that?"

"It's a localized search-and-tag protocol with a triple confirmation and an if true then delete function. It's not *that* hard, Monika."

"…huh." Monika nodded slowly. "It isn't, is it…"

For a moment there was total silence.

Yuri smirked slyly. "You were looking for a complicated bit of programming, weren't you?"

"…mmnysss…"

Natsuki shook her head solemnly. "So easily do you forget the basics —"

"You're the one that got icing everywhere, hush up!"

28.10 – Just One Too Many – by Zum1UdontNo.

" *MONIKA WHAT THE SHIT HAVE YOU DONE!?* "

"i' ***M*** *S* O r **R** ***Y*** , l *J* **U** sT **W a** *Nt3* ***d*** **T** 0 *t R* y l **T** *!* " Monika apologized. "i **D I** *d* N't k **N** ***ow*** t *HA* **t** –"

" *DIDN'T KNOW THAT IT WAS A YGGDRASIL-FORSAKEN GODAWFUL IDEA?! FOR FUCKS SAKE MONIKA FIX IT!* "

"I have to agree with Natsuki," Sayori chimed in, looking in the other direction and closing her eyes for good measure. "You probably should have known it would be a bad idea."

"T ***h*** *E* R **E's** n0 *r* e **A l** *PrE* **C 3** ***D*** E ***n*** T *f or* **TH** i *S* S *o* **rT** 0f ***Th*** **1** nG! *IT* w A **S i** *N* t h *E* ***N*** aM **E** *o* f **E X p** ***E*** *R* 1 m **e** *N tA T* i **0n .** "

Yuri rubbed her chin in thought, staring at Monika curiously. "Is it such a bad thing, though? It's a little strange at first, but there are likely plenty of applications for this."

"Now you're giving my girlfriend bad ideas!" Natsuki hissed. "Fix yourself!"

"f *1* N **e** . " With a finger snap that theoretically should have been impossible, Monika reverted herself back to normal. "There, happy?"

"No. But at least you're not breaking the game anymore."

"Actually," Sayori said, "the game seemed to run alright. There was a noticeable increase in core temperature, but asides from that the computer's fine."

"Well then, breaking…herself, I guess. And our minds. And no, Yuri, she can't tell you how to do it. I know that look."

Yuri lowered her hand and turned to the side, pouting uncharacteristically.

"So," Natsuki continued. "What have we learned?"

"Experiment only when nobody else is Awake?" Monika attempted.

"Nope. Try again."

The club president sighed. "Don't make four-dimensional body models."

"Don't make four-dimension body models. There, is that so hard? Keep it in three dimensions and we'll be fine."

(Addition by Masterweaver)

"Strictly speaking," Yuri pointed out, "all bodies are four-dimensional due to traversing through time–"

"NO," Natsuki commanded. "None of that. We're not getting semantic here. That was creepy, don't do it again, end of story."

28.11 – Back from Camp Edward (No Relation) by Awesomedude17.

(DDLC)/(Call of Duty: Zombies: Aether)/(Bar Loop)

"Looper Bars are greatest invention ever. There is always best vodka." Nikolai Belinski of Ultimis said as he took the recently set down bottle of vodka and began to drink it.

"Best damn beer too." 'Tank' Dempsey replied.

"Best sake as well." Takeo Masaki threw in his two cents.

"Und the best peach schnapps." Edward Richtofen raised his bottle.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Ultimis, the batshit crazy half of the four guys we had to help."

The four turned to see Natsuki raise a wine glass with Yuri.

"Where's your buddies?" Dempsey asked.

"Monika is having a game night with Sayori. Chess board, dice, and what I believe to be cookbooks by Vinsmoke Sanji."

"Do not know who Sanji is but he sounds like excellent chef." Nikolai belched a little. "I bet he makes excellent borsch."

"Right then, so what's new?" Yuri asked.

"Well we teamed up with our other selves and other Nikolai is such a downer." Dempsey admitted. "Otherwise, we did fine. Worst thing was even worse fart zombies, and that gave Nikolai ideas."

"You fight stink with stink, Dempsey."

"That's fucking sick, and everyone knows it." Dempsey shook his head, "Anyway, got some souvenirs from this place called Camp Edward."

"No relation to me," Richtofen spoke up.

"Have this." Dempsey tossed Natsuki some kind of brass knuckles. "Galvaknuckles. It's brass knuckles with a taser built in."

"Neat. It'll make my tsundere uppercuts all the more powerful."

"And painful. Nikolai shocked ass when scratched. Is not fun."

Yuri scratched her chin in contemplation.

"Low voltages, Yuri." Natsuki spoke up.

"Okay," Yuri said.

Takeo cracked his neck, and said, "We'll spare details. Most we'll say is that Ray Gun Mark II's are best invention ever."

"Oorah!" Dempsey shouted.

"I still cannot believe that America arms bears. Russian bears scary as is. Why give them guns?" Nikolai questioned.

"Rushmore said we bear arms, not arm bears."

"Why use bear arms? There is better bludgeons. Why use them when we have guns? Even knife that acts as gun is better weapon."

Natsuki groaned at Nikolai's current breed of stupidity.

Compiler's Commentary:

28.1: And now I have Baby Shark Doo-Doo-Doo-Doo stuck in my head, *again* . THANKS SAYORI.

28.2: The LONG OVERDUE conclusion of Yuri's *first* Hellsing Loop. Four more loops before she gets to keep her Vampirism.

28.3: Wooky had a head cold when he wrote this, and decided to "Write What You Know". If that's not making lemonade out of lemons, I don't know what is.

28.4: For those of you who don't have long hair, lemme tell ya; *LONG HAIR IS SERIOUS FREAKIN' BUSINESS!*

28.5: Absolutely nothing earthshaking or lifechanging is being foreshadowed here. There's nothing to see here, please move along.

28.6: Not to be a shitheel or anything, but "Hanging Around" is one of my favorite Counting Crows songs.

28.7: Ahhh, Nerf shootouts with the boys in the hood back in the good old days.

28.8: *Expressionlessly flips the number next to a sign reading "Days Since Last Existential Discussion in the Clubroom" back to 0.*

28.9: "Simplicity Works Best" is Natsuki's credo.

28.10: I've heard of "multidimensional characters" but this seems a bit much, Monika.

28.11: Oh, hey, these guys again. And I still know nothing about CoD so I have nothing clever to say about it XD

Chapter 29

29.1 – Familiarity, by Skaz Wolfman.

(DDLC)/(Shelter)

Rin Awakened in a bed that she knew very well, but instead of being in the middle of a field as usual, it was in a very typical looking teenage girl's bedroom. She tried to call on her tablet, but it didn't come to her. *'Not in the simulation. Wonder whose loop I'm in today.'*

The life of a Travelling Looper, Rin discovered, was very unpredictable. You never knew what the next loop would bring. One day she was in the Mushroom Kingdom learning to bake with Princess Peach, the next she was on the starship Enterprise exploring the wonders of the galaxy. She had even shared a handful out of the last hundred-thousand loops hanging out with her fellow Travelling Looper, *the* Travelling Looper, Jenny Everywhere. Those were always exciting: she *really* knew how to have fun in any loop.

Rin closed her eyes and let her memories for this loop pour through her mind…

Rin bolted up, eyes wide and glistening, hand clapping over her mouth to stifle a gasp. She tore out of her room right away, not even bothering to change out of her nightclothes. She flew down the stairs, into the kitchen, where her father was making breakfast. But he wasn't just her father in this loop, he was *her father* , the real one, whom she hadn't seen in hundreds of thousands of loops. She slammed into his side, hugging him as tightly as she could. She wept tears of happiness into his shirt as he hugged her back, understandably very confused but not about to ask her what was wrong just yet. His fatherly intuition told him his little girl just needed him to be there, for the moment.

…

Three months later:

Monika was in the middle of cooking a spicy vegetable stir-fry when she heard a rapping at her living room window. A window to a balcony that looked out over the streets of Tokyo, eight stories below. Monika turned off the electric wok and peeked out of the kitchen. A familiar teenaged girl was standing there. Quite calmly, Monika crossed over and opened the window. "Good evening, Rin. Hungry? I was just finishing dinner. I usually make extra, for quick and easy lunches you know."

"Good evening…" Rin paused, frowning.

Monika chuckled, rubbing her arms. "Come in, would you? It's cold outside."

Rin squeaked and hurried in, and Monika shut the window. "Sorry, I hadn't noticed. Temperatures between -50 and 200 degrees* all kind of feel more or less equally mild, to a Kryptonian body," she apologized.

(*Celsius, obviously.)

"You're fine," Monika reassured her as she returned to the kitchen, turning the wok back on to finish her stir-fry. "I suspect you're enjoying this Loop so far?"

"Yes," said Rin from somewhere behind her.

"Grab a couple bowls out?" Monika asked after a few minutes of awkward silence, after which her cooking was done.

"Yes, Mo…Monika," she replied.

"I'll admit, I'm surprised you bothered to look me up. I suspect you don't see Shigeru very often these days, being a Traveller and all," said Monika conversationally as she filled the bowl Rin had offered her. She gestured for the teen to help herself as she made her way

to the living room and sat down at the kotatsu. "Ahhhh~," she sighed happily as she stuck her half-freezing feet under the blanket.

Rin soon joined her, still wearing a troubled expression. Monika dug into her food, and rather than say whatever was on her mind Rin followed her lead. They ate in silence, Monika continuing to appear oblivious to the tension in Rin's posture.

It wasn't until after Monika had washed both of their bowls and started stowing away the leftovers in the fridge that Rin finally half-ran into the kitchen and blurted out, "Why did you leave?!"

Monika regarded her with a raised eyebrow. Rin blushed and said, "You were…you're my mother, this loop. Why did you leave me, and Daddy?"

Monika sighed and bit her bottom lip. "Rin…I…" she shook her head and rallied herself, "I don't understand why you would take it personally. I Woke Up, went into space to Pocket that planetoid, and…went about my own business, you know? I wasn't exactly feeling the whole 'housewife' thing, this loop. I certainly didn't mean to spite you, if that's what you think."

"So that's it?" asked Rin, hands on her hips. "You just vanished without saying anything to Daddy? When we first met you gave me the impression you were more considerate than that."

"Sorry to disillusion you," Monika sighed again, pulling out a bottle of beer before closing the fridge. "Next time you're in a Hub-loop, look up our visual novel if you want to see just how wrong you had me. It's called Dok–"

"I remember," said Rin, rolling her eyes. "And I already did. But you were *nothing* like that when I met you. And your friends clearly trusted and cared for you, so I figured it must have been ancient history."

"Yep. Ancient history, which we all still have occasional nightmares about," said Monika as she traversed to her living room and sat down on her sofa. She popped the cap off of her beer and took a sip before turning on the TV.

Rin sat down heavily on the sofa, arms folded. "If you really didn't want to stay with my daddy, you could have just divorced him. You didn't have to just walk out of our lives. It would have been nice to have memories of a mother, for once," she muttered.

Monika frowned. "Do you usually not…?"

Rin shook her head. "I don't know why, but she's never there. I obviously *had* a mother, once, for whatever reason she was gone before I was old enough to remember. It was just me and Daddy."

Monika took a longer pull from her beer before heaving a sigh. "I'm sorry, Rin. I didn't think it would hurt you."

"I'm not…I wouldn't say I'm *hurt* . I just…I don't get it. Who does that? Just up and leaves without saying anything? Just because you wanted to do your own thing? I've spent the last *week* flying all over Japan, looking for you!"

"Why?" asked Monika. "We're both Loopers, we're bound to bump into each other again someloop. Why aren't you enjoying the time you have to spend with your father?"

"Because I wanted to understand why you left," said Rin evenly. "Mothers don't leave their children, unless something is really wrong."

Monika laughed nervously, and shut off the TV. "Rin, I…I'm not… look, it's just a quirk of the loops, you know? Yggdrasil being whimsical. It doesn't *mean* anything. One time, I had a loop where I was the artificial daughter of two Loopers from Remnant. One of whom is *married* to another Looper. All three of us agreed it was just a weird thing and it didn't count for anything. I know you're still a

young Looper, but you're taking this too much to heart. Yes, I *happened* to be your mother for *this* loop, but–"

"You remember giving birth to me, don't you?" Rin asked in a very small voice, staring at her hands. "Remember holding me, feeding and changing me, taking care of me until you Woke Up and left us."

"…yes, I remember it all," Monika replied in an equally subdued voice, setting her beer down. "As clearly as if it were yesterday, just like I remember everything else." The slightest degree of coldness entered her voice as she said, "Rin, I have a lot of things to feel *legitimately* guilty about, and I don't appreciate people trying to add to it."

"I'm sorry!" Rin gasped, "I didn't mean–Monika, I'm *worried* about you. I've long since realized that older Loopers are…very strange people, more often than not…but what you did was very extreme, and I…please, just explain to me why you left like you did so I can understand it. Surely my Daddy isn't unbearable to be around? You were in love with him before you Woke Up. I understand you wouldn't have loved him anymore, once you Awakened, but even so…" she trailed off, no longer sure how to articulate her thought process.

"…I'm not cut out for love, Rin," Monika told her at length, staring off into space. "Not to be anyone's wife, or mother. Deep down in my soul, I'm hard-coded with a deep and profound *need* for love, as many people are, and every once in a while I'll Wake Up in a flesh loop like this to find that I fell in love and even married someone, before I Woke Up. I usually break it off, as gently as I can of course because non-Loopers are people too and their feelings matter and I hate to hurt people…but I always leave one way or another, because whether they understand why or not they're all much safer…much better off without me."

"But why?" asked Rin, pleadingly. "You're a good person, Monika. I know that you are. What you're saying about yourself doesn't make

any sense. Yes, you did bad things, but you're nothing like that anymore."

"I am," Monika said with steel in her voice, still not looking at her. "I haven't changed who I am. I don't believe people can change who they are, deep down. They just change the way they behave. I don't do bad things anymore, no, but I'm still the same person who did those bad things. I'm never going to be anyone other than who I am, no matter how many good things I do. I will *always* be 'Just Monika' and it will always be unsafe for me to love others."

"What about your friends?" Rin asked her plainly.

"That's different. The four of us are stuck with each other. I'm an Anchor, they're my Loopers; we need each other. And we're friends; different kind of love," Monika explained.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Monika. That sounds very sad," Rin said honestly.

"It is," Monika admitted. "But I can survive and be happy without romance, just like I can survive and be happy without meat."

"…I'm pretty sure there's a difference between having a lover and having a hamburger," Rin remarked dryly.

Monika snorted, "Okay, not my best analogy." Abruptly, she scooted over next to Rin and slung an arm around her shoulders, giving her a squeeze. "Thank you for worrying about me, Rin. You're a very sweet kid. If we really were a mother and daughter, I'd be very proud of you."

"Thanks," Rin said with a blush.

"Now, seriously, you should go home and enjoy this loop with your dad. We can hang out next time we have a loop together," said Monika, standing up.

Rin stood up as well and said, "Um…c-can I ask you for a f-f-favor, Monika?" She was blushing furiously, just thinking of what she wanted to ask.

One hand on her hip and one eyebrow cocked, Monika replied, "Rin…I really am sorry, but I can't come back. I've been gone for years, without a single word to him. Shigeru would never understand, even if I explained, and any lie I fed him to justify my absence would just…at this point, coming back would only hurt him more."

"No!" Rin cried out. "I wasn't going to ask you that…I just…well, I've never…I don't have any memories of ever…hugging my mommy…" she stammered.

Monika's eyes widened, and her cheeks pinked. "Oh…uh…ho boy… y-yeah, sure, we can…I can do that much, for you, I g-guess," she, too, stammered.

Monika put her hands on Rin's shoulders and took a deep breath. "Okay, five…fifteen seconds. For fifteen seconds, I'll be…'Mommy'… and you'll be my…little Rinny?" said Monika awkwardly. Then, before she could talk herself out of it, Monika put her arms around Rin and pulled her into a tight embrace.

She closed her eyes, and without meaning to she was overwhelmed by memories from the handful of years before she had Awakened in this loop. The memories of a guiltless Monika doting on her precious bundle of joy. Without meaning to, she hugged Rin even tighter. *'There was once a time when I would have really loved to be someone's wife, and someone's mother. I'd give almost anything to be able to want that again, without feeling horrible. You're so lucky, Rin, to have nothing to repent for. I hope you're lucky enough to never, ever understand how I feel.'*

'Fifteen seconds' lasted for fifteen minutes, and then Monika forced herself to let go. "You should get home, Rin," she said thickly, quickly turning around so Rin couldn't see her damp eyes. "Enjoy the rest of

this loop, and…I'll see you whenever I see you." Without another word, Monika snatched up her beer and retreated to her bedroom. Rin left the way Monika had let her in, and flew home.

…

Two days later:

Rin slept in this morning, waking up around noon. She felt a powerful, cat-like laziness in her bones today, and didn't really feel like emerging from her thick, warm blankets right away. A very tasty smell made itself known to her, eventually. A *very* tasty smell. Rin felt like her stomach was dragging her out of bed. Her daddy wasn't a *bad* cook, but this smelled way too good to be his cooking. She wandered downstairs to investigate, and was struck dumb by the impossible sight of Monika cooking omelets in her kitchen.

"Good morning this afternoon, sleepyhead," Monika casually greeted her with a smile.

Rin just stared at her. For some reason, the first thing that made it past her lips was "Why are you cooking eggs?"

"I'm not the kind of snooty, self-righteous vegetarian who pushes it on everyone else," said Monika simply.

Rin continued to stare. "Why are you here, Monika?" she asked at last, trying not to sound too blunt.

"Well, after thinking about it for a whole day, I decided that there *was* something I could do to make this loop happier for you. So I came back," said Monika.

"…how? I mean, you said, after being gone so long–"

"I used magic to overwrite your father's memories," said Monika with a guilty shading to her voice. "Now, I know that sounds sketchy, but…well, I've done a lot worse for selfish reasons, and I did this for

you . Shigeru remembers that he and I gradually drifted apart until we, very amicably, got divorced a few years ago. You handled it with outstanding maturity, by the way."

"Oh…okay," said Rin, processing the implications. *'She rewrote over a decade of someone's memories…to make me happy?'* She wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"It was bullshit, what I said to you," Monika admitted, shamefaced. "I never just run off like that. When I Wake Up in a relationship with someone, I *always* end it as responsibly and painlessly as I can manage. But thanks to the Conception Patch, I've never Woken Up with a *child* before, unless it was one of my club members. Honestly, I didn't even realize it was *you* until after I had Pocketed the planetoid and had been gone for a few months. I just…panicked, and ran off. That wasn't fair to either of you. It's all good and well to talk about how badly I feel about my mistakes, but it doesn't mean anything unless I *do something* about them, you know?"

Monika shut off the stove, and turned to face Rin. Seeing the look on her face Monika gave her a sad smile. "I told you, I'm not a *good* person, Rin. I'm just…I try my best. To take care of the people I… y'know, care about. There's nothing I wouldn't do for the people I love. And that's *why* it's dangerous for me to love. Loops like these, without Sayori or Yuri or Natsuki to keep me in line, it's all too easy for me to do something extreme."

Rin gave her a small smile, at last, and stepped forward to give her a hug. "It's alright…Momika. I know you mean well."

Monika rolled her eyes and chuckled as she patted Rin on the back.

They separated, and Monika Unpocketed a wand. "Now then, I need to find everyone Shigeru knows and use a Memory Modification Charm to make sure they don't find anything strange about me suddenly being part of his life, still. I should be done in time to take the two of you out for dinner tonight. I'm going to do anything I can to

make the rest of this loop as happy as I can for you, Rinny," she said with a fond smile.

"Okay!" said Rin happily.

After Monika had left the house, her smile waned and she sighed.

' *What the hell am I doing?'* she asked herself.

' *What I was made to do; make someone happy by giving them something they don't have,'* she answered herself. She set out to do her work.

29.2 – Testing, Testing! 1, 2, 3!, by Awesomedude17.

Monika was shouting at the top of her lungs as she slammed the Ragnarok DG-5 into the ground, creating an electrified shockwave around her. The training dummies flew sky high before landing back down with hearty thuds in pieces, as Yuri sliced through the joints with the Path of Sorrows, invisible to the human eye thanks to crossing over to the Yomi.

Natsuki then launched the pieces back up with a shot from Overkill's grenade launcher before unleashing an onslaught of 7.62 NATO munitions until the barrels glowed with heat.

Sayori then unleashed a blast of compressed gas, launching the pieces into a wall.

"Well, that was fun." Natsuki said.

"Yep. We should have these weapons training sessions more often," Sayori admitted.

"Speaking of, we've been neglecting our Huntress training." Natsuki turned her arms into cat arms and brought out Chekhov's Gun.

Monika nodded and the others brought out their Remnant weapons.

Gotta practice for when worse goes to worse.

29.3 – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Bored, by Masterweaver.

"What's going on?" Yuri asked.

"Monika's having another one of her philopsychophiclogical moments," Natsuki explained. "At least that's what I'm guessing from the various hovering textbooks with names like 'communication' and 'the universe'."

"Ah." Yuri frowned for a moment. "Wait, philopsychophiclogical? Really?"

"Well, how would *you* have mashed those two words together?"

"Pshychlosophgical."

"Pshychlosophgical…" Natsuki rolled the word over her tongue. "Yeah, that makes more sense than mine. Anyway, so Monika's doing that, and Sayori is there because she knows Monika needs somebody to bounce off of when it comes up, and I'm staying out of it because I think I heard something about brain structure of A.I.s and I do not want to get into that mess."

"Mmm."

"I mean you can join in if you want," Natsuki added. "It's more your jam then mine."

"Well, I could," Yuri agreed, "but I don't really want you to feel left out or anything."

"I was just going to go play some video games in my room."

"Maybe I could join you?"

"…yeah, sure. It'd be nice to play a game without Monika's super-competitiveness getting into it."

Yuri chuckled. "She can be a bit overbearing. So, what games do you have?"

"Funny story, actually, I looped into the Sonic world recently–"

"Let me guess, you replaced Amy."

"–yeah, yeah, pink and hammers, but anyway it turns out that Tails has actually taken it on himself to create quality-polished versions of their hubworld games, so I'm just about to start the Prower Approved version of Sonic '06…"

29.4 – Picture Imperfect Marriage, by Zum1UDontNo.

(DDLC)/(Super Mario Bros.)

"You're welcome, Sayori," Natsuki said, Unpocketing a sack and tossing it onto the clubroom table. Photos spilled out from the open entrance.

"Uh, for what?" Sayori blinked. "Also, what are these?"

"Potential blackmail," Natsuki answered. "There are lots of Branches where the Loopers like spreading blackmail material, like photos of them in compromising situations, stuff like that. Since we don't do that sort of thing, I figured I'd do you a favor."

"What kind of favor?" Sayori asked, reaching for one of the photos in the sack.

"I just came back from a Loop in the Mushroom Kingdom. And Unawake you got married to Waluigi."

"I what?" Sayori picked up a photo and glanced at it, immediately wincing. The photo depicted Waluigi and Sayori gazing into each

other's eyes, drinking a milkshake with two straws. "Ooh. I think I get it now."

"You didn't do anything like *that* , as far as I know, but you two spent the whole Loop acting like sickening sweethearts." Natsuki pulled another photo out of the bag, this time of Sayori asleep on Waluigi's shoulder. "Everyone thought it was funny, so I said I'd take all the pictures and distribute them at the end of the Loop."

"And?"

"And I didn't distribute them." Natsuki smirked. "These are the only copies of these photos in Yggdrasil, and the only proof of the incident that's left."

Sayori looked at another photo, of Waluigi pulling her into an elegant dip in a fancy ballroom, with a rose between his teeth. Then, she slowly stood up and turned to her friend.

"Natsuki. If it weren't for the fact that you're in a relationship, and also it would be really awkward, I would kiss you right now."

"You're welcome," Natsuki said smugly.

"To the recycle bin these go." Sayori snapped her fingers, and the sack of photos disappeared. "You're sure you were the only one who took photos, right?"

Natsuki opened her mouth to answer, but hesitated. "Well…mostly sure…"

"Natsuki…"

"It's *possible* one of them ignored what I said and took some on their own," Natsuki muttered. "But it's *really* unlikely! The Bros are respectful, Peach agreed, Bowser didn't care, and nobody else was Awake, so I'm almost certain nobody took any!"

"Well…" Sayori shrugged. "Almost certain is good enough for me. It'd only really be possible if someone was Stealthing."

Natsuki nodded. "Yeah, pretty much. But I don't think there's anyone from the Mushroom Kingdom that would do that anyway, so we're good, right?"

"Yo, Waweegee, I gotta photo for ya," Wario called out upon entering the room.

"Waht is it?" Waluigi grunted, not getting up from the couch.

"You was Unawake last Loop. You got married to an anime girl. I was Stealthing and took some snaps."

"Gimme."

Wario tried to throw the photo across the room. Like any paper object, it fluttered awkwardly and glided to the floor.

"There."

"Makin' me do everything," Waluigi muttered, glaring at the photo. His eyes glowed pink, and the photo floated over to him, where he snatched it out of the air.

"Her name's Sayori," Wario spoke up. "Some girl called Natsomethin was there too. From some doki place."

The photo showed Waluigi in a fancy purple and black suit, without his hat and with his hair slicked back. By his side was a girl with pinkish-brown hair and a fancy red bow, sweeping her well-combed hair to the side. Both of them were smiling widely, with a chapel in the background, and the girl was wearing…

"Holy," Waluigi said to himself. "That's one heckuva wedding dress."

"Brood'l bunny guys made it," Wario said, idly scratching himself. "Weddings is their specialty, apparently."

"Weddings is *my* specialty," Waluigi corrected. "But this dress…it's-a well-made. Draws the eyes well, good shade of white. Embroidery on the side's a nice touch, but could use work…I'mma take this design, I can do stuff with it."

Wario snorted. "Still going on about your boutique?"

"It's a passion, Wario," Waluigi shot back. "Come see me when you get yer own passion."

"I thought dancing was your passion. Dancing, sports and party games."

"Weh, go jump into a bottomless pit with no parachute." Waluigi Unpocketed a large book, titled *Waluigi's Big Scrapbook of Loopers Unawake Waluigi's Seduced.* He opened to a random page, slipped the photo into an open slot, and picked up a pen beside him. *Sayori,* he wrote. He paused, before Unpocketing a laptop and typing for a few seconds. He looked at the screen for a moment, before returning to the book. *Doki Doki Literature Club!. Both Unawake. Proper marriage.*

Satisfied, Waluigi Pocketed both items back, before standing up. "You got any other photos of that dress? I wanna workshop that design."

"Here, knock yourself out." Wario took out a large group of photos and tossed them into the air, where they fluttered about before landing.

"Choke on a poison mushroom," Waluigi sneered, before picking up the pile with Psychic. Some of the slipped out of the grip, but he didn't notice. "I'mma head out. See ya."

"Weh." Wario watched as Waluigi strode away, photos dropping like flies, before jumping on the couch he just got up from. Time for a nap.

"Yeah, you're fine, Sayori," Natsuki reassured. "I'm sure nobody else has these."

29.5 – Ink, by Awesomedude17.

"Dang it. Pen's out of ink." Natsuki said.

"I'll fetch another one." Yuri said as she set down a plate of black pasta.

"Please don't tell me…"

"Pen ink's inedible, Natsuki."

"Then why is that black?"

"Squid ink pasta. Try it."

Natsuki sighed before grabbing a forkful and taking a bite.

"Needs less salt."

"Got ya. By the way, you got something on your face."

"Where?"

"Your lips."

Natsuki wiped them with her hand, and saw a black streak. She gave Yuri a look before getting up.

"Natsuki?"

Yuri soon found her lips getting met with Natsuki's own. After pulling away, Natsuki let out a cheeky grin.

"Got something on your face."

"Yeah," Yuri replied with black lips. "I do."

29.6 – The New Blood On The Block, by Skaz Wolfman.

(DDLC)/(Hellsing)

Seras Victoria's attention was ripped from her book by an unfamiliar presence treading upon the shadow she cast across the Hellsing estate, in the dead of night. "Well that aint cricket," she said with a smile as she got out of bed and reached for her rifle. Then she stopped and frowned thoughtfully. "…nah, no sense rushin' it. This is the first int'restin' thing to happen all loop," she decided. She turned and stepped through a solid stone wall as if it were an open doorway.

"A ninja?!" she exclaimed when she rose up through the floor to find herself face-to-face with what she could only think to describe as a *ninja* . Black pajamas and everything!

The violet-eyed ninja blinked at her. "Well, this is unfortunate," muttered the evidently female intruder, "You're not the vampire I'm looking for. I don't imagine you'd be willing to go back to your coffin and forget about me?"

"Pfft, fat chance of that," said Seras, folding her arms. "For starters, I sleep in a four-poster, not a coffin. More to the point, *you don't belong here* ."

The ninja just shrugged and said, "Have it your way." Her arms moved like blurs as she threw a volley of shining knives. Seras's hands moved even faster, catching every knife and throwing it down into the floor with a bored expression.

"This your idea of a joke? You know 'ow much practice I've got dealin' with flyin' blades?" Seras asked. Then she paused after catching a knife, and frowned at it. "Wait, is this made of *cardboard* ?"

Then the ninja was behind her, there was a bright purple light and a loud thrumming, and something *very hot* sliced Seras in half, from shoulder to hip. Then the ninja kicked Seras's upper half away, and purple hair exploded out from under her cowl. The hair twisted into several long tendrils before snaking down and yanking up all the knives embedded in the floor.

Seras regenerated her lower half almost instantly and landed on brand new feet, spinning around to find herself facing a ninja armed with a purple lightsaber and wielding dozens of knives with hair-tentacles. Seras *beamed* . "Well hot damn, *now* we're talkin'!"

The ninja threw herself at the vampire, a whirling and swirling flurry of hacking, slashing, stabbing blades.

Seras met her charge head-on with a throaty battle cry.

The corridor was *painted* with blood in short order.

…

"…and after that, he decided to turn me," said Yuri as she reached for the teapot to refill her cup. "I was surprised, but like hell if I was going to question it."

"Master's whimsical like that, yeah," agreed Seras. After their skirmish the two of them had moved to the kitchen, where Yuri made tea. "Damn, but this is good," Seras complimented her after taking another sip. "You make your own blends?"

"But of course," said Yuri. "I spent a loop apprenticed to no less than Iroh himself in the art of tea-making. He made me embarrassed to think that I had already considered myself a teamaster."

"Yeah, he makes a damn good cuppa," Seras agreed. "Y'know, you don't *seem* like someone who'd be all that interested in vampirism, if'n ya don't mind my sayin' so."

"And I'm sure most people who meet you in passing don't think that you seem like someone who fights like a berserker," Yuri quipped with a friendly smile.

"Well, ya got me there," admitted Seras with a chuckle.

A sudden wave of darkness swept through the room, coating the walls in writhing shadows, and a thousand eyes opened among them, all staring at Yuri.

"Good morning, dear Count," Yuri said mildly, taking one more sip of her tea before she stood up. An ornate knife appeared in her hand.

The shadows converged and coalesced into a silhouette that loomed over Yuri, and then the silhouette resolved into the form of Alucard. He touched the brim of his hat, grinning sanguinely, and said "Good morning, O Yuri of the Third Eye."

"How soon can you turn me?" she asked bluntly, turning to face him, "I'd like to rematch Seras without the encumbrance of human stamina, as soon as possible."

Alucard frowned. "Just because I turned you once, you assume I'm going to keep doing it?"

"At least until I don't need you to, anymore, yes," Yuri replied. She started flipping her knife around in her hand.

Alucard folded his arms. "You're not very big on reverence, are you, Child?"

"Not especially, no," Yuri admitted. "I mean, I really don't see any reason to suck up to you, or anything. You agreed to help me, after all, since I'm a vampire at heart and all. Right?"

Alucard clapped his hands on Yuri's shoulders, and spun her around to face Seras again. "There, I've turned you," he said blithely. Seras facepalmed.

Then, before Yuri could articulate a protest, Alucard grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head to the side, opened his mouth wide, and sank his shark-like teeth into Yuri's throat. Her eyes widened while her pupils narrowed to pinpricks. A savage smile split across her face, and she impulsively buried her knife into her own stomach.

…

The next night:

Masonry shattered under Seras's feet as she leaped off of the wall that ran around the Hellsing estate. She spun around in midair and raised her Harkonnen anti-materials rifle with one-hand, firing at the shadow that pursued her. An amorphous, many-armed shadow with Yuri's face at its center, the shadow seeming to flow out of her hair. She had a vertical third eye open on her forehead, and each of her arms held a different bladed implement. Daggers, knives, swords, hatchets, axes, sickles, scythes, etc.

The shell from Seras's rifle punched right through Yuri, but missed her face by inches due to her shifting it aside at the last second.

Seras landed on the ground, and just as Yuri was about to fall upon her she Pocket-swapped her rifle for a pair of miniguns. She roared and gave Yuri *all* the barrels at point-blank range. Yuri's shadowy blob body was shredded almost instantly, but her face shot upwards as her human form seemed to leap out of the shadows with a kukri in each hand. She opened her mouth wide, and a shadowy limb shot out and grabbed Seras by the face. Yuri reeled herself in and fell upon Seras with her blades swinging and singing in the night air.

Seras caught both of her wrists and pushed her arms out wide, and sent her staggering backwards with a skull-cracking head-butt. "Yer

a *lot* more into the 'ole 'eldritch abomination' side of this than me or Flora," she said with a grin. "I get why Master likes ya."

"Are you sure it isn't just the big tits?" Yuri asked with a smirk, wiping away the blood trickling down her brow. "You and I have that in common, I've noticed."

"Eh, prob'ly that too, if'm bein' honest," Seras replied. She Pocketed her miniguns and Unpocketed a chain-fed automatic grenade launcher. "Now, your turn at bein' the Rabbit."

Sir Integra watched this very bizarre take on 'moonlit frolicking' from her office.

"And you're not at all concerned about him siring *two* in the span of a month?" Walter asked her when he brought her tea.

"Not really," she replied, "They're both clearly capable fighters, and therefore assets to the organization. If he does a third this year, I'll give him a warning."

"What can I say?" asked Alucard, announcing his presence from right behind Walter who, to his credit, did not flinch in the slightest. "It's just so refreshing to have the pitter-patter of children's feet around the house."

"Hmm," Integra grunted noncommittally, as the three of them watched the young vampire girls 'playing' in the backyard.

29.7 – Digital Adventure, by Masterweaver.

"This makes no sense on multiple levels!" Yuri snarled as she cut through another surveillance program. "Why would anybody kidnap Monika?! Why hasn't she escaped?! Why did they take Natsuki too?!"

"You're not curious about *how* this happened?" Sayori asked, tangling up an antivirus protocol with her yoyo.

"We're clearly–" Yuri chopped through a few more digital foes. "–in a more representative version of the internet–" She skidded under a flying spambot, letting it assail the local servers. "–so it's probably a lot more possible!" Her knives spun out, cutting into the bytes of a writhing defense program. "What bugs me is that we were still technically from a dating sim, so there's no reason for anybody to spend this much effort capturing us!"

Sayori conceded the point with a shrug, absently wrapping her yoyo around a switch protocol and tugging it. "Okay, system's on standby. We've got two minutes to hack in a pass-through program so we don't have to get caught up in this mess again."

"Because that's completely accurate," Yuri grumbled, quickly pulling up a code window.

"Hey, this is a representative version of the internet, you said it yourself." Sayori rubbed some sweat off her brow. "And hey, we could use a little digital adventure every now and again."

"If it turns out Monika was just playing hostage so we could have a heroing session, I swear I am going to…do something…mean!"

"Uh-huh, sure. You want help with the code?"

"I got it, I got it."

"Fine, just here if you need me."

A portal opened with a hum of ones and zeroes. The two looked at each other, nodded once, and jumped through.

29.8 – **A Delightful Chat, by Zum1UDontNo.**

Club Room

Monika Awoke in the club room. Idly Pinging, she checked through the game's code, reviewing the recent changes. Fortunately, she had

Awoken early enough that her Unawake self hadn't done anything yet. Monika began the process of updating their sprites to models.

Sayori rubbed her eyes as she Awoke, Pinging in reaction to Monika's. Awakening while actually waking up was a rare treat; the clubroom table wasn't the most comfortable pillow, but it was still nice. She probably had bed head, though…oh well.

Yuri Pinged in response to her two clubmates, Unpocketing a vicious-looking dagger, eyes darting rapidly across the room. Considering her last Loop had her in an immensely dangerous world, her reflex to defend herself at the Loop's beginning was understandable.

Natsuki *has joined the room*

Natsuki: *pings*

Natsuki: sweet, we're all awake huh, what're we doing this loop

Natsuki: hey what the fuck

Monika paused. "Wait…Natsuki?"

Natsuki: yeah it's me

Natsuki: now wheres my body (≠ـ_ـ)

"Uhh…hmm." Monika looked around. Sayori was glancing around, nomming on a cookie she Unpocketed. Yuri had lowered her knife, and was also looking at the clubroom. Natsuki was nowhere to be seen.

"Nats, are you sure you're here?" Sayori yawned. "We don't see you anywhere."

Natsuki: i mean i'm talking to you right now so i've gotta be here somewhere

Natsuki: god this is fucking weird

Yuri Pocketed her knife and frowned. "I think, you are *here,* but…not in the same way we are. I don't think we're *hearing* your words, it's more like we're *feeling* them. You're definitely more abstract."

Natsuki: yeah thats a word for it huh

Natsuki: monika what did you do

"Why do you always blame me for these things? I didn't even have time to do anything!"

Natsuki: implying that you WOULD if you had the time

Natsuki: look just…(^>⌂<^)

Natsuki: i'm hungry and i wanna eat but i don't think i have a stomach

Natsuki: find my stomach

Sayori swallowed her bite of cookie. "That's what you're most worried about?"

Natsuki: no i'm just

Natsuki: this is

Natsuki: …

Natsuki: ( )

All the girls yelped in alarm as the table suddenly flipped over on its side. Monika sighed. "Natsuki, please put the table back…"

Natsuki: fine fine ┬──┬ ( )

Natsuki: i still don't like this though

"My juice got spilled," Sayori muttered.

Natsuki: sorry sayori

Yuri tapped the table in thought. "So, you don't have a physical body, but you can clearly still interact with the world. We know what you're saying, and you can clearly see and hear us."

"Is she like a narrator, then?" Monika asked. "Wouldn't surprise me if that were the case."

Natsuki: nah i don't feel like a narrator. i don't have a script or anything

Natsuki: why are you so calm about this

Monika shrugged. "It's just interesting, that's all."

Natsuki: interesting huh

Natsuki: do i look like i care about interesting

Natsuki: no of course i don't

Natsuki: because i don't look like ANYTHING (╬ Ò ‸ Ó)

"And it's just kind of…random," Sayori added. "Normally whenever Yggdrasil throws some kind of variant at us, it usually *means* something. Like, some kind of pun, or…" She slowly trailed off, realization on her face.

Natsuki: i'm not going to like this am i

"Oh my God," Sayori whispered. "I know what this is. I know what the pun is."

Yuri and Monika both looked to Sayori.

Natsuki: alright what is it

" *Chatsuki.* "

There was a brief silence.

Natsuki: CHATSUKI

Yuri snickered.

Natsuki: WHAT

Natsuki: are you fucking

Natsuki: this is

Natsuki: PIECE OF SHIT TREE

Natsuki: FOR THE LOVE OF MONIKA'S TITS

Natsuki: …

Natsuki: i

Natsuki: will be right back

Natsuki *has left the room*

Monika blinked. "For the love of what?"

Natsuki's Room

Natsuki *has joined the room*

Natsuki: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAERRRRRRGGGGHHH

Natsuki: FUCKING AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Natsuki: FNIURNGLIJAYJNGTRH;WTIUENGNJGTGSJS

Natsuki:
DIJNFHOSREUIJNEIGHNHSEUGINERUGHSEIOHGOAUIRNFMK
REOGUQYAHFP;NORGLHREIGOIAUQREBGHKWBFUHYBREG

Natsuki: ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( )

Natsuki: FUCKS SAKE I STG

Natsuki: FUCKING CHATSUKI

Natsuki *has left the room*

Club Room

Natsuki *has joined the room*

Natsuki: alright i feel better now

Natsuki: what're we doing this loop

Monika raised an eyebrow. "For the love of what, Natsuki?"

Natsuki: uh

Natsuki: y'know what, i'm gonna just

Natsuki *has left the room*

Monika sighed. "I'm not going to get an answer, am I…"

29.9 – Memories of a New Reality, by The One Named Light.

It's amazing what can happen if you bring a Brawl Modpack from 2019 with you to 2012. New Fighters, New Stages, New Mechanics. All wrapped up in a convenient package for a time traveler to pass off as one's own code…granted that they have the coding prowess to back up said claims. Luckily, this is what one Monika of the

Looping Literature Club had in spades following Loops and Loops of practice so it made it all the more sense for her and her Literature Club to bring 'their' mods to the developers of the Biggest Mod out there: Project M.

"So, how did they think about our mods?" Sayori spoke to her superior.

"Not entirely sure…" Monika reflected as she picked up the controller. "While the characters 'we' made for our portfolio have impressed the team, they want to see us at work on other modding projects before they consider putting them on the game…mainly new mechanics for existing characters."

"Yeesh, so now we gotta cook up new stuff for the veterans to tinker around with?" Natsuki inquired. "What's left to add to the moveset?"

"A Guard Special," Monika interjected, pacing back and forth across the room. "In an earlier Near-Hub Loop, I found this 'Duke of Dorks' on YouTube who suggested unique shields for the Fighters and was met with an even better idea: Press the B and Shield Button, use a defensive or utility-based move."

"Hey, that's actually not that bad!" Sayori mentioned. "We can move FLUDD to Guard Special with the other Nozzles mapped to the tilts."

"Falco's Melee Shine, Chargeable Rock Kirby, The Fire Emblem Counters. The list goes on!" Natsuki boasted to her peers. "What the hell are we waiting for? Let's get cooking, ladies!"

"I don't see why not…" Yuri shrugged to her peers. "We know enough coding know-how to keep ourselves comfy in our game…"

"…and Sayori's not very far off from the godlike prowess Monika's packin'" Natsuki flattered, the VP blushing ecstatically. "I'd say this Project M thing's gonna be a piece of cake!"

"Then it's settled!" Monika smiled. "The Literature Club will be hard at work on the most renowned Modpack Super Smash Bros. Brawl has ever seen!"

They all cheered as Hiroaka just sat there, unaware of how and why they came to this idea in the first place. "All this from a collection of Sonic Characters?"

29.10 – Et Tu, Yuri?, by Awesomedude17.

Yuri placed down a pile of lettuce with knifes sticking out.

The others looked at her with looks ranging from amusement to annoyance.

"Yuri, I asked for a Caesar salad." Monika said.

"Yep!"

Monika rolled her eyes. "I'll let it slide this time."

"Good, because I actually prepared the actual salad already." Yuri took out a bowl of Caesar salad and some plates.

It was delicious.

29.11 – Daughter of Darkness, by Skaz Wolfman.

(DDLC)/(Hellsing)

"Well, this is an unconventional way to start a Loop," Sir Integra remarked. Seras and Alucard, standing off to the side, had to agree.

The Major, The Doktor, and The Captain were all hogtied, gagged, and unconscious at Integra's feet, and her butler was bowing in a very formal manner. Hands, knees, and forehead all touching the floor. "A hundred-thousand apologies, Your Ladyship. I know it wasn't *my* fault, per se, but I still feel *horrible* for what I was planning to do before I Woke Up," said the butler.

"Yes, well, seeing as you're a Looper and you've taken care of our dirty work for us, I'm sure we can all consider this water under the bridge," said Integra. "The rest of Millennium?"

"Everyone who was still human has been turned over to the authorities, who are getting ready for Nuremburg Round 2 as we speak, and everyone else…well, despite my best efforts, they wouldn't settle for anything less than outright annihilation. Captain Fluffy here would probably have bitten it too if it weren't for his very specific weakness."

Integra looked down at the bound and gagged werewolf, who was short a couple limbs and covered in burns. "Quite," she agreed. "And…Schrodinger?"

"Convinced him that exploring outer space would be more fun than mass-murder. Hopefully that keeps him busy for the length of this loop, or failing that maybe the beauty of the cosmos will teach him to appreciate life, or something? I dunno, he gave me the sense he wasn't inherently malicious, just running with a bad crowd without much of an inclination to personal intersection."

Integra frowned. "You mean 'introspection'?"

"Yeah, that's what I said," the butler replied without a hint of irony in her voice.

"Hmph. Oh, up to your feet already, you're clearly nothing at all like Walter so I bear you no ill will," Integra ordered.

Sayori sprang up to her feet immediately, saluting crisply.

"Welp, Millennium's right pickled, so I'll be taking the rest of the loop off," Seras announced, "I'm off to the Middle East to kidnap Pip for a month or two in Fiji~"

"Do take care of the garbage on your way out, Seras," Integra commanded offhandedly as she returned to the seat behind her

desk.

"Aye, aye, mum," she said as she scooped up the three men in her arms. "Give my love to Yuri when she's done mucking about in the vents!" she called over her shoulder as she kicked the door open and left.

Not five seconds after this remark, a ventilation grate in the ceiling popped off and a ninja fell into the room, landing on her feet as lightly as a shadow.

"Yuri~!" squealed Sayori, glomping her friend.

"Oh, hello Sayori," Yuri replied mildly as she pulled her cowl off.

"Another member of your club?" Integra surmised.

"Oh, right!" Sayori yelped, "I never formally introduced myself." She let go of Yuri and gave Integra a formal, ninety-degree Japanese bow. "Sayori, Vice-President of the Looping Literature Club, known also as Sunshower and Darth Somnus the Dream-Dancer, Smiling Lord of the Sith."

"A Sith Lord," said Alucard, "A gunfighter, and a Hunter of Hunters who aspires to be a vampire. I simply can't *wait* to see what the other one is like," he said with genuine relish.

"Oh, Natsuki's just a fluffy little ball of fun and joy~" Sayori sang.

Yuri waited a beat before saying, "Was this a Natsuki you met recently, or…?"

Sayori shot her a glare. "C'mon, Yu, she's not even *here* ."

Yuri just giggled in reply. Then she turned toward Alucard, just in time for him to jab her in the forehead with two of his fingers. "Huh?"

"You're getting to be a big girl, Yuri, so I've decided to give you a little test before I turn you this time," he explained.

"What kind of test?" Yuri asked. Her tone sounded mellow to Integra, but Sayori recognized the easy-to-miss edge of 'you are *so* on' in her friend's voice.

"Hide and go seek," replied Alucard. Then he disappeared, sinking quickly through the floor.

"SorrySayoriwe'llcatchuplaterIpromise!" Yuri blurted as she dashed out of the office.

"NO RUNNING IN THE MANSION!" Integra yelled after her. "If they tear this place apart, so help me," she grumbled. She looked up at Sayori and said, "I do hope *you* don't intend to 'renovate' my home with Alucard while you're here, as your president did."

"Nah. The art of alterations is something I hone for when I need it, not for casual displays of 'Who's Kung Fu Is Stronger?', y'know?"

"You mean 'the art of altercation'," said Integra.

"I know, that's what I said," said Sayori.

"No, it wasn't, and don't contradict me in my own home young lady," said Integra with narrowed eyes as she lit herself a cigar.

Sayori raised an eyebrow, and pulled a lock of her hair down in front of her eyes. It was more 'gray with streaks of peach' than the other way around. "I'm *pretty* sure I'm, like, forty years older than you right now, at least."

"Physically, perhaps," Integra conceded. "But anyone can see that you're still a child at heart. So, what *are* your plans for this loop?" she asked as she Unpocketed a crossword book and pulled a pen out of one of her desk's drawers.

"Well, I've never been anyone's butler before. Think maybe I'll just keep doing that, if that's alright with you," said Sayori.

Integra looked taken aback. "You… *want* to be a servant for a loop?"

"Sure. Taking out Millennium was more than enough action for any one loop, and butlering is still something I've never done before. Just because I'm a Looper doesn't mean I can't enjoy doing something banal and prosaic," said Sayori, her speech graduating into flawless Queen's English as she spoke.

Integra's mouth twitched towards smiling, and she nodded. "Very well. Bring us a pot of Earl Grey, then."

Sayori clicked her feet together and bowed, English style. "At once, ma'am."

…

"Found you!" shouted Yuri as she burst into a room.

Alucard, sitting in a plush armchair with a glass of wine, tipped his hat to her. "Very good. Now, since there's no possible way you can evade my senses in this mansion, you just have to catch me," he announced as he stood up, and then sank through the floor again. Yuri dived at him, but she was too slow, and smashed her face into the armchair.

Yuri tore out of the room and ran through the mansion, using all of her finely honed senses to seek out her quarry. She also implemented her, admittedly limited, knowledge of Alucard's psychology, trying to pin down where he would go. She ruled out the basement and his room: too obvious.

Instead, she found him in Walter's (or rather, Sayori's) room. Once again, she *just* missed catching him, though this time she avoided slamming face-first into the wall Alucard slipped through.

Finally, their game of cat and mouse ended when Yuri found Alucard's new hiding place, and he dropped through the floor again…and landed in Yuri's waiting arms. "Oh, how nice of you to drop in, my Count," Yuri said with a small smile.

Alucard slid his glasses down his nose and raised an eyebrow at her. "I really shouldn't allow tagging through proxies…but since you bothered to employ some actual strategy instead of just throwing a mob of Shadow Clones at me, I'll allow it," he said.

"Actually, *this* is the real me," said Yuri, "I used a teleporting seal to swap places with the Shadow Clone I had waiting down here. I also had Shadow Clones waiting in all the rooms adjacent to the one I found you in. I anticipated you might deem proxy-tagging invalid. And since Natsuki isn't here, I feel compelled to argue on her behalf that simplistic tactics like Zerg Rushing are still valid strategy."

"Well said, Child," chuckled Alucard. "So, do you intend to hold me like this all night?"

"Do you *want* me to?" Yuri asked innocently, blinking large eyes at him.

Alucard laughed again, even as he turned into mist and slipped through her arms, reforming standing a few feet from her. "Very well done, Yuri. For someone who had no predisposition to hunting before she became a Looper, you're quite good at it."

"I wouldn't say I didn't have *any* predisposition to hunting," Yuri countered, "Many of my more eccentric behaviors and interests could have been considered warning signs of a serial killer waiting to happen."

"Speaking of which, how has the 'Third Eye' thing been going for you since the last we met?" Alucard asked, starting down the corridor they were in. Yuri fell in step behind him.

"Had a Hub Loop not long ago. Spent it in Tokyo. Metropolises are always rife with ne'er-do-wells and blackhearts," said Yuri.

"Any memorable kills?" he asked.

"Tch, what kind of girl do you think I am, Count?" she asked haughtily. " *All* of my hunts are worth remembering. Each one is a singular experience. Identifying prospective prey, then getting to know them, learning their story, making certain they're worth my time and effort, and then meticulously planning the big night, taking pains to make sure everything goes just right. All for that one climactic moment, when the reaper is called and the scales of this world and the next are shifted by the weight of a single soul."

"You make it sound like a courtship," he remarked.

"I suppose the two are similar, in a way. Of course, I've never seriously contemplated intermixing both kinds of intimacy. Carnal passion should be treated as a celebration of life and a festival for the senses; getting the dead and insensate involved pollutes the whole thing. Also, that sort of thing is repugnant even to someone like myself."

"Indeed," Alucard agreed, and for a time they walked in silence.

"I'm very glad to have made your acquaintance, Alucard," Yuri spoke up. "Not even for the vampirism, really. I'm just glad to have met another with whom I can frankly discuss things like this. My friends, darlings that they are, accept me for who I am without reservation… at least, so far they have." She pulled a finger down through one of her locks. "But even so, there are many things I can't talk about with them, not without making them uncomfortable. You're the first person I've ever met that I feel like I can wholly be myself around, without holding back."

"And I thought you didn't believe in kissing ass," he remarked dryly.

Yuri swatted his arm. "I'm being *sincere* ."

"I know you are, Child," said Alucard. "I'm glad I met you, as well. You're a most welcome breath of fresh air."

…

A few nights later, Yuri soared through the night over London. Of all the benefits of vampirism, one of her favorites was the heightened senses. She felt each and every individual strand of her hair being tugged at by the wind. A hundred-billion different scents flowed into her nose with every inhalation, but instead of blurring into an odious miasma she could still appreciate them all by themselves. Her vampiric sense of sight was the best, she thought. She could say as clearly as day, but unlike most forms of night-vision it didn't just dispel the darkness. She saw *through* the darkness. Clear as day, but indescribably different from daylight. She felt she might have been willing to trade her unique sense of pain-pleasure just to keep her vampire eyes, and she was very glad that making such a choice was unnecessary.

Yuri landed on the edge of a roof, and closed her eyes to better absorb the sounds and scents of the city. She opened her mouth and breathed in deeply, savoring the taste of the city air. The city below was full of humans and restaurants, and with each breath she could taste them all. Laughter spontaneously bubbled up through her, and she threw her arms out and spun around on the precipice. "How can *anyone* think of this as a tortured existence? How can this possibly count as being undead? I can't conceive of a richer way to live!" she declared.

"You're made of something very different from the common clay," Alucard remarked as he approached her from behind. "Most people lose something precious to them in submitting to the everlasting darkness. Either you don't have that something, or it pales in comparison to what you gain."

Yuri abruptly spun around and glomped into him, hugging him tightly. "Thank you, Sire, for this gift. I don't think I could ever tell you how much it means to me," she said to him. Then she spun back around and took a running leap off the edge of the roof, whooping as she soared into the night again.

"Sire, eh? That's a new one," Alucard murmured to himself, before taking off after her.

Compiler's Commentary

29.1: Family is a wonderful but often difficult thing. And you don't *choose* your family, you just find it.

29.2: …whatever happened to just playing with Super Soakers?

29.3: Damn it, I want a Prower Approved version of Sonic '06 ;-;

29.4: Awww, thanks for the leftover wedding cake, Natsuki!

29.5: Squid ink pasta; much better than you might think!

29.6: Yuri and Seras…blood-sisters?

29.7: *Tron intensifies*

29.8: Confabulation defragmentation pixilation augmentation simulation…sorry, what were we talking about?

29.9: Code girls gonna code, I guess.

29.10: First salad was too high in iron, methinks.

29.11: Sayori spent her next thirty or so loops back home "butlering" for the rest of the club. Complete with accent. Monika had no clue how to feel about it.

Chapter 30

30.1 – Nun Too Holy, by Skaz Wolfman.

(DDLC)/(Hellsing)

Ping. Ping. Ping. Pingpingpingping…

" *YURI* !" screamed a shrill voice that echoed far down the halls of what was technically a convent.

Yuri poked her head out of her room and hissed, "I'm down here! Keep quiet, would you?"

A familiar pink-haired girl barreled down the hall like The Running of the Bulls and plowed into her room, almost bowling her over in the process. " *Pleeeeeeeease* tell me you're Awake, Yuyu, *we need to get the hell out of here ASAP* !" Natsuki moaned as she glomped tightly onto Yuri.

"Wow, how'd you manage to fit six feet of tension into a four-foot frame?" asked Yuri, impressed.

"I'M FIVE-THREE YOU FU–!" Natsuki started shrieking before Yuri clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Yes, I'm Awake. Naturally we're flying out of here with all due promptness, even if I have to cut us a path," said Yuri, holding up a katana and shaking it for emphasis. "And as a nifty bonus, I know exactly where we're going, too."

"Great, awesome, let's just get *the fuck* out of here *right now* , please," Natsuki whimpered.

Yuri let go of Natsuki and grabbed the rucksack she had packed off of her cot. "Do you–"

"No, I don't care to pack anything I just want to get out!" Natsuki snapped, "I'd be halfway to the Alps already if I hadn't known you were here, too."

"Wow, you are really not taking this well," Yuri observed as they left her room. Natsuki took the lead, and Yuri had to run to keep pace with her.

"No shit I'm not taking this well. We're–we *were* goddamned assassins, Yuri!"

"Technically, we were godblessed assassins. At least, in the eyes of the Pope, and I imagine his opinion on the subject carries some weight."

"Uh-uh, no way in hell," Natsuki grumbled. "I don't care if The Big Man Himself says so; any God that condones that 'holy war' nonsense is no God I wanna hear about. You know how Monika feels when she Wakes Up with blood on her hands, so you had better believe I'm pretty pissed off. I've got half a mind to bring this whole building down with this whole Iscariot Organization locked inside, except that would make me a hypocrite. The *Iscariot* Organization, Yuri. They're literally named after Judas Iscariot. What the hell kind of Branch is this?!"

"Oh, you don't know? I thought you would, I first heard about it from one of your manga," said Yuri.

"Clearly it's one of the effed-up ones I was never tempted to read. You know most of my manga collection is Loop Variable. Hold up, this'll do," said Natsuki as they passed an open-air courtyard. Yuri followed her into the courtyard, under the light of a half moon, and in a blinding flash of pink light Natsuki assumed her Majin form. People passing by pointed and shouted. Natsuki swept a giggling Yuri off of her feet, and took to the sky with a thunderous leap that cratered the ground behind them. "Hold on to your big gothic tiddies, my love!" Natsuki shouted as she tore away across the sky at blistering speed. Vatican City was well behind them in less than a minute.

…

A few days thereafter:

"Are you sure you don't want to change?" asked Natsuki. She was human again, wearing a pastel-pink sundress, elbow-length white gloves, and a wide-brimmed hat with a sunflower on it. Perfectly complimenting the image was a parasol, colored with red, blue, and yellow swirls. Walking alongside her was Yuri, still wearing her nun getup with her katana in hand.

"It'll be fine, trust me," said Yuri. They were walking along the road, towards an expansive estate. No doubt the stately familial manor of some well-to-do English clan with blood bluer than the ocean at high-noon, Natsuki thought. "Hang back for a bit, Nat. This will work best if she doesn't see you at first. This is going to be *great* ," said Yuri with a mischievous giggle. Natsuki's heart picked up its pace; she knew that giggle, it meant Yuri was going to do something nuts. Then she took off in a run towards the gate to the very estate they had been passing. Two guards posted at the gate shouted at her, but she took a flying leap over their heads at the gate.

The guards raised their rifles, and Natsuki's eyes widened. Without thinking, she stomped on the ground, and the asphalt under the guards bucked up as if there were a monster of a mole under their feet. Their aim was thrown wide just as they fired their guns, and Natsuki lowered her parasol just in time for a stray bullet to bounce off of the Shield Charm that imbued it.

Yuri grabbed onto the gate, more than halfway up it, and flung herself over top of it. She hit the ground running towards the mansion. One of the guards grabbed at the gate, and in a heartbeat Natsuki Pocketed her parasol, whipped her hat off her head, took a deep and very controlled breath as her skin drank in the light of the sun, and grabbed a bar of the iron fence next to her, which described the estate's perimeter and ran all the way to that very gate. *'Metal Silver Overdrive!'*

Electricity arced across the fence, all the way to the gate in an instant, even as the guard was still pulling the gate open. A spark sent him flying backward into the road. "Hey bozo! Have a Speedwagon Special, on the house!" Natsuki shouted before throwing her hat discus-style at the other guard. He whipped around to face her, just in time to catch her hat with his chest. The seemingly mundane sunhat struck with the impact force of a stout Frisbee fired at high-speed from a pneumatic gun. Meaning he was bowled over and laid out on his back. Natsuki ran up to the open gate and through it. Yuri was halfway to the mansion's front doors, already.

Those very doors were violently kicked upon by a buxom young woman in a uniform, touting a rifle longer than she was tall, which she aimed one-handed at Yuri and fired from the hip. Yuri nimbly dodged the slug, and Natsuki threw herself down on the driveway as it whizzed past her. The woman put her other hand on the rifle, ejected the spent shell and slipped another slug in, raised the rifle to her eyes, and fired again. At the same time, Yuri closed the remaining distance between them in a blur of motion, an effect Natsuki recognized as an opportune application of Witch Time. By the time the second slug left the rifle barrel, Yuri was slashing through the rifle with her katana, and cutting through one of the guardswoman's arms just below the elbow in the process.

If Yuri's opponent felt any pain from this dismemberment, she didn't express it in the traditional manner of crying out in pain and/or going into shock or a blind rage. Instead, she calmly used her other hand to catch Yuri's blade on her second swing, and casually snapped it in half between her fingers. Then she snapped a kick into Yuri's midsection, sending her flying and then tumbling and skipping back along the driveway. Natsuki watched as Yuri again become a blurry, seemingly amorphous figure, and a moment later a veritable hailstorm of knives were streaking through the air towards the mansion's stalwart sentry.

Something , Natsuki thought it looked like a mixture of blood and darkness, gushed explosively from the guardswoman's stump,

expanding and forming into a massive arm-like structure that she used to catch all of the flying blades. Then she shook them off, and the shadowy appendage shrank down and reformed into a much more normal-looking fleshy arm. She pulled an absolute hand cannon of a revolver out of her sidearm holster, and took aim at Yuri.

Natsuki jumped back up to her feet, a baseball and a bat appearing in her hands. She tossed the ball straight up with a hard spin on it, and took a measured breath as she gripped the bat in both hands. The power of the sun charged through her blood, and she directed it through her bat, making it vibrate intensely in her hands like a jackhammer. The ball came back down, and at just the right moment Natsuki struck it with all her might. In the instant of contact, the Hamon energy in the bat suffused the baseball, and the power of Natsuki's Hamon-enhanced swing turned it into a blistering, corkscrewing sphere that tore through the air and shattered the sound barrier. The guardswoman's eye was naturally drawn to the source of a ground-level sonic boom, and without hesitation she fired a three-round burst at the ball. Each shot hit it, but was completely deflected by the ball's axial rotation. So she lowered the gun and caught the ball with one hand. She gave an agitated hiss, not from the pain of the ball tearing the skin of her hand, but from the sudden infusion of Hamon energy that fatigued her, leaving her feeling a little light-headed. Being out in the daylight was tiring enough for her, a creature of the night, and while sunlight was no fatal threat to vampires of Seras Victoria's breed it still had a detrimental effect on her strength.

Yuri took advantage of the distraction and dashed up to Seras, a black-shafted and white-bladed naginata appearing in her hands. While Seras was briefly staggered by the sudden drain she experienced, Yuri thrust out with her naginata, spearing her right under the breastbone and into the heart. Using the naginata as a lever, Yuri swung her up through the air and slammed her down headfirst into the asphalt.

As Seras staggered back up to her feet, Yuri Pocketed her naginata and bowed. "Good afternoon, Seras," she greeted.

Seras returned her greeting by shooting Yuri in the gut. "Hullo, Yuri. That don't count, you had help."

"HEY!" Natsuki screamed, charging at her with her bat raised. Next thing she knew, Seras was behind her and had her in a chokehold with her own bat.

"MASTER ALUCAAAAAARD!" Seras hollered, "YURI'S HERE AN' SHE'S BLEEDIN' OUT SO YA MIGHT WANNA COME DO SOMETHIN' ABOUT IT!"

"WELL BRING HER IN, POLICE GIRL, IT'S NOT AS IF YOU DON'T HAVE ARMS LIKE A HAIRLESS BEAR!" a man's voice called from inside the mansion.

"Oh no…" Yuri groaned, more in annoyance than pain, as she clutched her stomach.

"Yeah, sorry. He's in one of those moods," said Seras somewhat awkwardly as she let Natsuki go. She started towards Yuri, but Natsuki was already by her side.

"Lay down, Yuri. Gently, now," she ordered firmly, pulling a pair of fabric shears and a marker from her Pocket. She quickly cut away a large patch of Yuri's clothes around the gunshot wound. She closed her eyes and pressed a hand on Yuri's body. "Good, the bullet passed clean through, and the damage isn't too complicated," she muttered as she used the marker to draw a complicated transmutation circle on the palm of her unbloodied hand.

"Nat–"

"Not now, let me focus!" Natsuki snapped. She slapped her hand down over Yuri's injury, and sparks flew. It took a moment, but when

Natsuki retracted her hand the injury was gone. "How's it feel?" she asked.

"One-hundred percent," Yuri assured her. "But Alucard would have fixed it just fine."

"Yeah, well, you're not *his* responsibility," Natsuki grumped as she helped Yuri up to her feet.

Yuri raised an eyebrow at that. "Oh, really? You're *responsible* for me now, are you?"

"As the Club's least-fucked-in-the-head and the one with the best grasp of the concept of 'self-care', yes, I'm responsible," Natsuki said firmly. "I make sure Monika sleeps when she goes too long without it, I make sure I'm always prepared for Sayori's rapid descents, and I make sure your body stays functional despite your best efforts. It's a thankless job, but lesser badasses than I have worked harder for their loved ones."

A small giggle bubbled out of Yuri, and she leaned down and planted a surprise kiss on Natsuki's nose. "Thank you, my sweet kitten," she whispered. Natsuki's ears started to smoke.

A high-pitched, keening squee drew their attention back to Seras, who had her hands over her mouth and looked like she had just seen a unicorn.

Natsuki sighed. "Yes, we're precious, I know. So, you two have clearly met before," she remarked, narrowing her eyes at Seras.

"Oh aye, a few times," said Seras, smiling cheerfully in the face of Natsuki's withering glare, which itself withered away in the face of her radiant expression. "So, you must be Natsuki," she guessed, sticking her hand out. "Seras Victoria, at your service."

"It's *Nats* uki," Natsuki corrected, accepting the handshake…and giving Seras as much Hamon as she could, to her visible discomfort.

Natsuki raised an eyebrow. "You are one *robust* corpse, Sarah," she remarked.

" *Seras* ," Seras corrected, her smile tightening as she gave Natsuki's hand a crushing squeeze. In response, Natsuki's skin became pink and gummy, and her Majin grip-strength matched Seras's vampire grip-strength.

Then Yuri dope-slapped both of them. "Alright, enough of that, you two," she chided. "Natsuki, Seras is my friend. Please get along with her. Really, you two are acting like *boys* ."

"Hey, I'm not mad at her for shooting you, honest," said Natsuki, *mostly* honestly. "Just getting a measure of her, that's all." She and Seras released each other's hands, and Natsuki resumed her human form.

"Measure her all you like, with tape even, just don't be rude about it, *please* ," Yuri stressed.

"Alright," said Natsuki. She and Yuri followed Seras into the house.

"You *are* undead, aren't you?" Natsuki asked, "I *know* your body rejected the Ripple."

"Natsuki," Yuri sighed.

"Aye, I'm a vampire," Seras confirmed, eyes forward. "But as Master likes to say, I'm a *real* fucking vampire. Sunlight isn't *harmful* to me, just…" she stopped to yawn hugely. "Just kinda tiring, is all. Another *hour* of that, and you might have made me sleepy. Maybe. But I aint gonna disintegrate like summa them milquetoast vampires that you get in other Branches." Then she glanced over her shoulder at Yuri and said, "So you, an aspiring vampire, are dating a Hamon warrior? You're just a bottomless well of curiosities, Yuri…er, you two *are* dating, right? I'm not reading too deep into things, am I?"

"Natsuki has, in recent loops, been promoted from my best friend to my girlfriend, yes," Yuri confirmed, sidestepping behind Natsuki and wrapping her arms around the shorter girl's midsection, plucking her up off of her feet. Natsuki loudly grumbled at this treatment, but didn't actually go so far as to protest. "In a way, I'm almost disappointed that your Hamon won't cause me any kind of burning agony. That would have been something fun to experiment with."

"Bleh," Natsuki groaned. "Sorry Yuri, but even if it did, I wouldn't use it on you that way. You know darn well there's only so far I'm comfortable going to satisfy your masochistic tendencies. Still, knowing it'll have a *sedative* effect on you means I might be able to use it to help diffuse you when you get manic, so there's that," she mused.

Yuri and Natsuki followed Seras into a large room, occupied by a tall, slim, pale man in a black suit, with long black hair spilling down his back. He stood in front of a canvas and easel, painting something. "Yuri!" he greeted warmly, "So good to see you again, dear Child. Found religion, have you?"

"More like I Woke Up in a very strange place, you could say," said Yuri.

"You didn't gank Anderson on the way out, did you?" he asked, "I've got plans for old Franken-Priest. Three-hundred gallons of sacramental wine, Betty and her Royal Guard, and St. Paul's Cathedral are involved. You wouldn't happen to have an assload of sequins in your Pocket that you don't need, do you?"

"No, I didn't kill Anderson, and I don't have any sequins in my Pocket," said Yuri.

"I've got sequins out the ass," Natsuki spoke up.

"Well hello there, my new best friend. Did Yuri make you at Build-A-Bear?" asked Alucard.

"Ha, ha, ha," Natsuki deadpanned. Then she elbowed Yuri.

"Oh! Right," said Yuri. "Alucard, this is my girlfriend, Natsuki. *That* Natsuki, I'm sure you'll recall. Natsuki, this is Alucard, my vampiric Sire."

"Sire?" Natsuki asked, furrowing her brow. "So, what, he's like your dad? You've never had one of those before, not even in Baseline."

"I–…huh. I…hadn't really thought of it quite like that," said Yuri. She regarded Alucard with a strange look in her eyes.

"Well, he'd better be nicer to you than most of the dads I've had in the loops," Natsuki said, giving Alucard a challenging look.

"He's very nice to me, Nat. Don't worry your sweet little head about that," Yuri assured her.

"So far, yes, but if you don't change out of that filthy Iscariot garb, you're going to be grounded young lady," Alucard quipped with a grin as he glanced up from his painting.

Yuri rolled her eyes and disappeared into her Pocket.

"So…" Natsuki said into the ensuing silence. "The Catholic Church in this Branch is pretty disturbing. You guys are the Royal Protestant Knights of the Hellsing Organization I learned about in Iscariot, I'm guessing?"

"Eeyup," confirmed Seras, who had sat down at a table to field strip her sidearm.

"The Reformation in this Branch's history must have been a hell of a brawl," Natsuki muttered. She turned back to Alucard. "So, Dracula with a lazy pseudonym, or son of Dracula who was lazy about naming kids?"

"Neither," Alucard replied curtly. "I was, once, the man known as Vlad Tepes III, known also as 'Dracula' and 'The Impaler'. The

codename Alucard was bestowed upon me when I was bound in service to the Hellsing family."

Natsuki raised an eyebrow. "Bound in service, huh? How'd that happen?"

"A completely mortal and for the most part fairly ordinary man, a doctor of all things, *kicked my ass* ," Alucard explained with an air of someone recalling 'The Good Old Days'. "And as he did not destroy me outright, in the tradition of Wallachian honor my life (such as it is) is his family's to command. Which suits me just well, for the Hellsings and I have the common goal of exterminating monsters. After all, slaughtering ordinary humans by the thousands had gotten dull, anyways."

Natsuki nodded. "I think I can see why Yuri looks up to you."

"Looks up to me, does she?" asked Alucard, pausing in his painting and raising an eyebrow at Natsuki.

"You just told her to change her clothes, and she didn't ignore you or argue with you. That's a pretty substantial gesture, coming from her," Natsuki explained. "Something Yuri and I have in common; coming out and just *telling* people how we feel has never really came easily to us."

Yuri reappeared, wearing a dark purple suit very similar in style to what Alucard was wearing, with a knee-length skirt and stockings in place of slacks. She even had a pair of sapphire-tinted shades to mirror Alucard's amber-tinted pair. She complimented the ensemble with a matching bowler hat, a silver-handled saber hanging from her hip, and a cane that was decorated with a carving of a crow. "How's this?" she asked, crossing her ankles and leaning on the cane with her left hand on the hilt of her saber.

"Magnificent," Alucard complimented, setting his paintbrush and palate down to give her a few claps. Natsuki looked her up and down

and whistled appreciatively. Yuri glanced her way from the corner of her eyes, and gave her a smirk.

Alucard stepped away from his painting and held out his hand to Yuri. "Shall we begin, Child?" he asked, smiling monstrously.

"Of course," said Yuri, switching her cane to her left hand and putting her right hand in Alucard's.

Then, to her surprise, Natsuki snatched her cane away, and grabbed her left hand. "I'm coming with you," she said plainly.

Yuri's eyebrows shot up. "Natsuki…c'mon, you don't want to see this…"

"No, I don't, not really," she readily agreed, tucking Yuri's cane under her arm and holding her hand with both of her hands. "But since we've gotten together, you've indulged my interests a lot more than the other way around…so, I want to be there, to share this…moment with you, I guess," she explained, blushing furiously.

"A'www," Seras squealed from her table.

Yuri stared wide-eyed at Natsuki, blinking slowly. Then, on impulse, she darted forward and crushed her lips against Natsuki's. "I love you, Natty," Yuri whispered breathlessly when she broke the kiss.

" *A'www* !"

Alucard coughed. " *Ahem* . Making me feel like a third leg, here, girls."

"Why, because you're a huge dick?" Natsuki quipped without missing a beat. Yuri turned beet-red and Seras fell out of her chair laughing hysterically.

"Oh God, Integra's gotta hear that one," the former police girl gasped as she scrammed out of the room.

"And I thought Yuri had nerve," Alucard said with a grin. He ruffled Natsuki's hair with his free hand. "I may not *really* be Yuri's father, but if I were, you would have my blessing."

Natsuki shrugged. "Whatever, man, I had no intention of asking for it…but thanks anyways."

"That's Tsundere for 'aww shucks, thanks, Dad'," Yuri translated. She squeaked when Natsuki stomped on her foot.

…

Hours later, Natsuki was still pale-faced, and she had a white-knuckled grip on the edge of her bed in the guest room Integra had granted her. Being the swanky joint this was, *every* bedroom had its own bathroom, and Yuri was presently occupying theirs.

Yuri exited the bathroom silently, and sat down on the edge of the bed silently, just far enough way to make it inaccurate to say she was sitting next to her. "I did warn you," Yuri said gently. She sounded more apologetic than reproachful, though.

"Yeah, I know," Natsuki sighed. "And I…knew it was going to be *grisly* , but…Christ, Yuri, you *really* lost it. Or, it sure looked that way. You were screaming and…and you *gutted* yourself. With an Aztec dagger, if I'm not mistaken."

Yuri produced the dagger in question from her Pocket. "You're not. It seemed appropriate. I'm sorry I frightened you, my darling one," she said genuinely.

"No! No, you didn't…yes, I was frightened, but not…I don't know, it was just more visceral than I expected. Honestly, I'm more annoyed at how shaken up I am than I am shaken, y'know? Like, I told myself I knew what I was going in for, and I…I overestimated myself. The only thing that pisses me off more than other people underselling me is me falling short of my own expectations."

"But you're also intimidated by me, now," Yuri said plainly. "Please don't get defensive," she was quick to add, "I can smell the fear in your blood, Natsuki. I *saw* the tension of your muscles under your skin when I came back into the room. My feelings aren't hurt, mind you. I know that you have no more control over your emotional reactions than I have over mine."

Natsuki tried to control her breathing, but her whole body was shaking. "I'm sorry, Yuri…I'm a shit girlfriend, there's no reason for me to be afraid right now and I *know* it!"

"Natsuki! It's okay, you're only human," Yuri said gently, though she made no move to get closer to her, "And right now, I'm one of humanity's most primal nightmares: a life-drinking, soul-stealing creature of the Dark. Your reaction is irrational, but completely reasonable. I'm not offended at all, I just wish there was something I could do to comfort you right now, without making it worse."

"You can get closer, and hold me," Natsuki murmured.

"That…seems like it would only agitate your present state…"

"I don't *care* that my stupid body is screaming for me to run," Natsuki growled. "I know your heart, Yuri. I know you're no danger to me. Please, Yuyu, hold me?"

Without any further prompting, Yuri slide closer and pulled Natsuki into a tight embrace. She moved them both closer to the middle of the bed, and laid down. Natsuki turned over and wrapped her arms around Yuri, as well. Yuri rubbed her hands up and down Natsuki's back, and although her shivering got worse, Natsuki was able to get her breathing under control. Hamon coursed through her body, and she immediately warmed up. Yuri suddenly yawned. "Wow, Seras wasn't kidding. It…*yawn*…feels like I'm cuddling the Sandman."

"Sorry!" Natsuki squeaked, "Just trying to warm myself up, Yu. Your body's as cold as…well, death, I guess."

Yuri abruptly ceased moving. She sighed. "Yes, of course I am… Natsuki?"

"Mm?"

"Please don't get angry."

"Kay."

"Do you…please, be honest, do you think, maybe, we're not such a good match, after all?" Yuri asked hesitantly. Timidly, even. "We're as different as night and day. I'll never be able appreciate your sickeningly sweet proclivities, any more than you'll ever appreciate my grotesque intrigues. And I…I'm not sure if I could give this up, to make you happy."

Natsuki sighed heavily. "Yuri, you dunce," she grumbled. "We're a *horrible* match, by any measurement, for the reasons you just said and a thousand others."

Yuri sank her teeth into her own lip to stop herself from crying out.

Natsuki's arms tightened around her, and she continued, "And none of that 'on paper' crap matters, because I love you and there's no one I would rather be with than you. And don't sweat it, I wouldn't presume to ask you to give up anything for me, cuz I know you wouldn't do that to me, either. Look, do you *want* a partner who's more like you than me?"

"No!" Yuri gasped, "Natsuki, how could you…"

"Exactly, you silly ass," Natsuki giggled, nuzzling her face into the crook of Yuri's neck and planting a kiss. "That's exactly how I feel, too. Sure, we're as different as night and day. That makes you the yin to my yang. We complete each other. Seeing you go all unhinged like that when you were transforming just brought up old traumas and sent my head to a bad place. But that's okay, because my happy place is with you, too."

Yuri gave another strangled gasp as emotion overwhelmed her, affection and gratitude gushing up inside of her and spilling over in the form of tears. She hugged Natsuki as tightly as she dared, burying her face in her hair. She breathed in deeply, and laughed. "I can never get over how much sharper my senses are, how much more richly detailed the world becomes in this form," she murmured, running her hands up and down Natsuki's back and arm. "I thought I already knew your body by heart, but there's still so much *more* to you. It's like I'm *experiencing* you for the first time, all over again. My sweet little cupcake. My fierce hot-blooded kitten. My inimitable, irreplaceable summer breeze. My Natsuki."

"And you're my favorite body pillow," Natsuki grunted with a smile. "I love you too, Yuri." They were quiet for a while, and then Natsuki asked, "Hey, Yuri. Why *did* you flip out like that? Haven't you already done this a bunch?"

"Well…yes, I've done this before, but by the nature of the loops each time was centuries apart, so I've really never gotten used to it," Yuri explained.

"…how does it feel? When it's happening, I mean," Natsuki asked her.

"It's a very *raw* feeling," said Yuri. "Like…imagine being a caterpillar, and making your chrysalis, and the chrysalis isn't just a container, it's a part of you. And then, suddenly, something tears you out of the chrysalis, but…you're not just the thing inside the chrysalis, you're also the chrysalis itself. It feels like you're being torn free from something, leaving you naked to the world that was outside of the chrysalis, but it also feels like something has been torn out of you, leaving you empty inside. Then the *power* flows into you. The floodgates of the mind are torn down, and everything you've spent your life repressing comes bubbling up out of your subconscious. It's like spending a lifetime looking up at the moon, knowing it's forever out of your reach, and then suddenly the night sky itself whisks you away and then *you're on the moon* . It's strange and unnatural and nothing like the world you left behind, but you feel so light, so

powerful. Everything becomes possible. More literally, the physical sensation of the human blood being pulled out of you leaves your insides burning. The agony is terrible, but when it fades it leaves behind an impenetrable coldness. It's not uncomfortable, it feels fortifying. You feel indestructible. And that's around the time your head clears enough to notice how your senses have expanded. Sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste; all of them refined and expanded. *That's* why I 'lost it'. I was, as always, overwhelmed by the sudden surge of sensitivity. The first time Alucard turned me, it was so intense I almost tore myself in half on sheer impulse. Of course, Seras tells me that that her transformation was very different; she had to grow out of thinking in terms of her human frame of reference, and she gradually discovered the extent of her heightened senses and new powers. For me, it was everything all at once. And Alucard…doesn't like to think about his transformation. So I guess experiences vary."

"Damn," Natsuki whispered. "When I turn into a Majin, I just feel really hyper, like the mother of all sugar rushes. Hey, isn't there supposed to be, like, some gaping void in your soul that comes with being undead, or something? What gives?"

Yuri shrugged. "If there's an emptiness in me, I've never noticed. Probably because it's full of you."

"Okay, damn, even *I'm* getting a toothache from all this schmaltz. Say something creepy, *please* ," Natsuki mock-pleaded.

Natsuki suddenly found herself on her back, both of her wrists pinned above her head by one hand, while the other caressed her face. Yuri's eyes, smoldering crimson, bored into hers. "I'm going to claim each…and every…single…part of your body as my own, Kitten," she growled from her throat.

"Th-that's n-not creeping m-me out, like, at all," Natsuki whimpered, honestly. Yuri's eyes widened, went from smoldering to *burning* , and she smiled devilishly. Natsuki's body had another primal reaction,

and this time it wasn't anything like fear. It was a very different flavor of anticipation.

" *Good* ."

…

Late in the next day, a groggy Natsuki stumbled into a dining room, following the smell of food. She found Integra, Seras, and a man with very long hair and an eyepatch eating dinner together. "Ah, Natsuki, how good of you to join us," said Integra, gesturing with her fork. "Come then, fill yourself a plate and tuck in."

" *Arigatou* . Where's Yuri?" she asked as she sat down next to Seras. She speared a couple of steaks onto her plate, then a heaping lump of mashed potatoes and an ear of steamed corn.

"Her an' the Master are out right now, doing somethin' with the Queen and St. Paul's Cathedral, I dunno," said Seras before tearing a chunk out of her (very rare) steak.

"So, zis ees our Yuri's little woman, eh?" asked the man.

"Normally a short crack like that would earn you some kind of scathing retort, Frenchie," said Natsuki, gesturing with her corn, "But honestly, I'm way too relaxed to give a crap. My brain is *swimming* in endorphins right now. Vampire chicks, am I right, man?"

"Damn straight," agreed Pip, and he and Natsuki shared a fistbump across the table.

30.2 – Markov's Eye for the Girl Who's Shy, by Masterweaver.

Natsuki stepped into the clubroom, whistling brightly-right up until she caught sight of her girlfriend.

Her girlfriend, who had umbral lacey boots held up with garter straps that crawled beneath a lilac and black plaid skirt belted to her by a chain.

Her girlfriend, sporting an ashen corset with frilly purple edges and a pair of long, fingerless gloves bound together by another pair of chains with faint heliotrope circuitry carved into the pitch dark latex.

Her girlfriend, face covered in pale makeup, save for the shadows painted around her purple eyes, one long strand of hair dangling in front of her nose down to her thighs and the rest pulled back by a slightly smaller chain to show the amythest and obsidian beads piercing her ears.

Natsuki took in her appearance, considered for a moment or two, and crossed her arms. "Cybergoth?"

"Yep."

"Woke up like this?"

"Yep."

"Looks good on you."

Yuri smiled, though not broadly enough to ruin the effect. "Thanks."

30.3 – One Thousand Words, by Awesomedude17.

Natsuki laid out a rather large scrapbook of various things that the club collectively agreed to record.

Sayori immediately knew how old it really was when she saw a picture of her in a neck brace and Monika nervously explaining to Natsuki and Yuri that Sayori tried to hang herself.

To anyone else, this would've been shocking. To them, it was a reminder that they've changed quite a bit.

"Well this is bringing back memories."

"Yeah. I barely remember half of this stuff." Monika said. "Wait, I don't recall having anyone take this."

Natsuki and Yuri looked over to see Monika using a remote and feeding a saddened Sayori, who was wrapped in a blanket like a sushi roll, snacks.

"Oooh, I was Stealthing then. Sayori had another burst of suicidal thoughts and tried to kill herself again, but Monika stopped that. Needless to say, I had a lot more pics."

"Where are they?"

"Some dork named Spyro burned them by accident. You're safe there."

"…it was the point where you started shipping me and Sayori, right?"

"…yes."

Monika sighed.

Sayori giggled.

Yuri quietly nodded and made a note to add in the copies she made when she was Stealthing then as well.

30.4 – Mechanical Hearts: Break, by Skaz Wolfman.

(DDLC)/(RWBY)

Monika was hanging out at Tukson's Book Trade, waiting for Emerald and Mercury to show up so she could thwart a murder. No one in Vale seemed to be Looping, and going by Pings there were only three other Loopers Awake right now; she knew Sun and Raven were among them, and that Sun was back in Haven dealing with the treacherous Leo Lionheart. Monika and her friends were attending Beacon again, but this loop they were a year ahead of RWBY and JNPR.

Monika frowned and checked her watch; it was getting late in the day, and no sign of a thief and a butcher. Then she heard screams,

and bolted outside. Outside, she found people pointing and screaming and running from a familiar ginger-haired girl chasing down another familiar mint-haired girl. Then she saw an *identical* ginger-haired girl emerge from behind the first one. And *another* coming from across the street. All three of them where swinging identical sets of flying blades, while Emerald was taking potshots at them over her shoulders as she ran. Hence the screaming bystanders.

A dark-blue biotic aura flared around Monika, and the orange holographic interface of an omni-tool appeared on her wrist. With a thrust of her hand she conjured a powerful Singularity in midair that pulled all three of the Pennys off of the ground, and with a few quick keystrokes on the omni-tool she targeted them with a chain of Overload commands. Emerald, not questioning this sudden change in her luck, put on a sudden burst of speed to get away. Monika stepped aside to let her dash past, but clotheslined her at the last second. "Sorry Em, but you *are* still a criminal," she said apologetically before pinning her to the ground with a red-glowing Stasis mass effect field.

Monika's Singularity dissipated, dropping the trio of Penny clones on the sidewalk. "So, what's going on, then?" Monika asked. "I don't think your generuncle would approve of you–any of you–causing panic in the streets."

"We're not property!" one Penny snapped venomously at her.

"I…don't think I implied that I thought you were?" said Monika quizzically.

"We don't need *anyone's* permission to do what we need to do," the same Penny said furiously, "We're completely autonomous beings!" As if to emphasize this point, she swung a blade out and sheared through a lamppost, toppling it into the street. Cars squealed to a stop.

"Yes," said Monika, holding her hands up in a 'whoa there, let's talk this out' gesture. "Yes, you are absolutely autonomous beings, just as much as I am. The people around us right now are autonomous beings too, and you're scaring them. So let's just–"

"Screw them!" another Penny snarled, "What have any of *them* ever done for us?"

"Yeah! We're trying to protect these ungrateful meatbags!" added the first Penny.

Then the third Penny threw herself at Monika without saying anything, but there was something different about this one. It's face was placid and calm, not twisted in disgust like the first not-Penny or fury like the second. And, quite unlike any Penny that Monika knew, this one was wielding only two swords, and in her hands at that. It wasn't unheard of for Penny to manually wield a sword, if its string was severed or in cases where her strings were rendered disadvantageous, but Monika knew it wasn't Penny's style to start an encounter with blades in hand.

' *Welp,'* was all Monika could think before she Unpocketed a magna-staff, a six-foot length of metal with each end spitting arcs of violet-hued electricity. She gave it a spin before meeting the maybe?-Penny's charge, deflecting both of her initial swings. She hooked a foot around Penny's ankle and yanked her foot out from under her, and spear-thrust her magna-staff into Penny's chest, pinning her to the ground. Violet electricity arced all over Penny's Aura. *'So it's some kind of living person, not just a Penny-lookalike.'*

Two swords embedded themselves in the side of a nearby building, and two more in the sidewalk on either side of Monika. The second Penny, the one with an almost-foul mouth, pulled herself towards Monika with a flying kick. Monika jumped aside and smacked her down in midair; she sprang back up immediately, like a rubber ball, and sank a rising uppercut into Monika's stomach. Monika flew through the air, tumbling head over feet, towards the first Penny, who was charging up her Sword-Laser with a coldly satisfied expression.

'Three different Penny-lookalikes, with three different attitudes and fighting styles, and each with an Aura and therefore a soul. I have a hypothesis,' thought Monika, even as she reached a hand towards the Penny she had first knocked down. A mass effect field shimmered around her, and Monika Pulled her along the sidewalk, into the Penny who was about to blast her. Said Penny got her legs knocked from under her, and fell on top of the other Penny. Her swords were yanked up and discharged their laser beam harmlessly into the sky. *'Hopefully someone from Beacon sees that,'* she thought.

Monika tried to land on her feet, but had to settle for landing on her ass. Hard. "Oww," she groaned as she used her magna-staff to push herself back up to her feet. The really angry Penny charged her with a fist drawn back, screaming. Eyes wide, Monika dived to the side; Penny's fist instead struck a parked car, blowing out all its windows and sending it skidding across the street.

"Wait!" called out the seemingly calm Penny, holding her swords in one hand while she used the other to help the one she had toppled back to her feet. "You're fighting for the wrong side, stranger. All we're trying to do is purge this city of evil. The deceiver is the only one we want, and she doesn't deserve your protection," she said levelly. She didn't sound emotionless, but she was much more subdued than the Penny Monika knew.

Monika nodded. "Good to know. Sorry, but us 'deceivers' have to stick together!" she said before using a mass effect field to bolt over to Emerald's side. She negated the Stasis field and grabbed her, and then they both disappeared into thin air, as far as the Pennys could tell.

"Well that's just *great* !" yelled the angry Penny, throwing her hands in the air. "Now what do we do?!"

"We go back to Base, and prepare for the next mission," the calm one replied simply.

…

"They k-killed Cinder!" bawled Emerald, crying all over Monika's shirt. Monika, feeling thoroughly awkward but trying to ignore it, held the distraught young woman and patted her back. They were sitting on the floor in the laboratory area of Monika's Pocket.

"Hey, buck up," Monika said gently, "Cinder would be pissed if you fell to pieces like this. Try to calm down and tell me everything you know, and I'll do what I can to make this right.

"Y-you kn-know C-Cinder?" Emerald hiccupped.

"Yes, we met a very long time ago," Monika replied honestly. "There are a lot of things I don't like about her, mind you, but I've always admired her drive to succeed and envied her for being so at peace with who she is. And my best friend is friends with her, so that's enough for me to give her the time of day, if nothing else. Anyways, I'm also friends with a girl named Penny, who looks very much like those three killbots, but the Penny I know would never do something this vicious, so I have an all-around vested interest in getting to the bottom of this mess. Can you help me, Emerald?"

Emerald sniffled miserably. "I…don't think I can…those three attacked Roman's hideout out of nowhere…killed him, and Neo, and Mercury, and C-Cinder… *and I ran like a coward* !" she screamed, breaking down in tears again.

Monika grabbed Emerald's shoulders, pushed her back to her arms' length away, and smartly *smacked* her across the face. "You ran, and you *survived* . Process your guilt later, we have *work* to do."

"R-right," said Emerald, rubbing her cheek.

"Now, for now, just…try to hold it together for a minute, while I…well, if it's as bad as I think it might be, I need to bring my A-game," said Monika as she stood up and walked over to a machine. She pressed a button on the side, and a pod attached to the side opened up.

"This is going to take a while, so be patient," she instructed Emerald as she climbed in the pod. "And don't touch anything!" she added before the pod closed.

An hour later, a different pod opened and Monika climbed out of it. She worked her neck from side to side, but instead of popping vertebrae her neck made…whirring noises?

"Um…what'd you…do?" Emerald asked.

"Transferred myself to a robotic body," replied Monika as she exited the lab, Emerald tailing right behind her. "Something tells me this isn't a job for a meatbag."

Monika disappeared, and a moment later Emerald found herself back on the streets of Vale. Monika was talking into a Scroll, "Well I'm sorry, Raven, but this is *important* . I'm not going to name names, because I put a high stock in discretion, but someone's killed Cinder, and Emerald is still alive. Savvy?"

A red portal tore itself open right next to Emerald, and she squeaked and darted behind Monika as Raven Branwen emerged in her full Bandit Queen regalia. "What the hell happened to Cinder?" she asked right away.

"First things first," said Monika, pulling a wand out of her Pocket and turning to face Emerald. " *Obliviate* ," she incanted, and Emerald's eyes glazed over. Monika stepped aside and gently pushed Emerald towards Raven. She staggered forward like a sleepwalker. "When she comes out of it, she'll remember losing Cinder and Mercury, but she'll think she lost them in a Grimm attack in the wilderness. Tell her you and your tribe that you saved her. I imagine you'll be her new Cinder; please don't let Vernal kill her in a jealous fit or anything."

"Hey," Raven snapped, "Vernal's loyal but she's not…like Emerald. I mean, yeah, she does have a crush on me this loop, I'm pretty sure, but that's a Variable thing. You know I can undo that charm, right?"

"Yes, I do, and I thank you in advance for *not* doing so," said Monika primly. "When everything is said and done, I'll tell you everything that I feel comfortable telling. But inasmuch as is possible, I'd like to keep this situation on the down-low. Like I said, discretion is a cardinal virtue to me."

Raven folded her arms. "Emerald's one of us, so I'll take her in for free, but if you *really* want me to keep my curiosity to myself you're going to have to offer me some compensation, Monika."

"Fine," Monika groaned, "what do you want?"

"What do you think? Something you don't want anyone else to see," Raven replied with a grin.

"…you think I have blackmail material *on myself* ?" Monika asked.

" *Everyone* keeps something on themselves. A memento from a loop you'd kill to keep anyone else from seeing, for example."

Monika's eye twitched. "Alright, fine," she sighed as she handed Raven a photo album. "From a loop where I replaced Peach and married Bowser…well, Bowsette, technically," she said irritably.

Raven raised an eyebrow. "And why would *you* of all Loopers keep something like this?"

"…there're some really nice pictures," Monika muttered, blushing.

Raven opened the album to a random page, and found her own cheeks pinking. "Wow."

"Make copies for yourself, because I'm going to want this back before the loop ends," Monika said firmly. The she frowned. "But keep it in your Pocket until I see you again, just in case something goes wrong and this loop crashes. If Ruby never Wakes Up I might be the only Anchor here, and I might be doing something very dangerous soon."

Raven snapped the album shut and Pocketed it, nodding. "Alright, my avarice is satisfied. Good luck with whatever you're doing, Yandere Meme."

"Oh, flap off," Monika grumbled as she walked away. Raven grabbed Emerald, still in a post-Memory Modification fugue, and disappeared through her portal with her.

…

Awake or Unawake, Ruby was one of the most important and closest people to Penny, so Monika felt she was the closest thing she had to a lead. She got to Beacon and managed to track down Weiss. "Ruby?" she asked, frowning, "She got a call from that odd Penny girl this morning, asking if she'd like to hang out in the city *all day* , apparently." Weiss's disapproval was audible. "The next semester is starting soon, we should be getting ready, not wasting a whole day on frivolity."

Monika got Ruby's number from her, though Weiss cautioned that Yang had tried to call her earlier and she had never answered. Monika hurried outside and tried to call Ruby, but she got no reply. *'Alright, different tactic,'* thought Monika, closing her eyes and linking up to the CCT network. She also connected to a server full of Vine compilations in her Pocket, and deluged the CCT with uploads until one of the access nodes crashed. In a window of several nanoseconds– *'Gotta give it to big momma Atlas, their systems are resilient'* –she had embedded a very illegal trace program, and started sweeping the Kingdom for Ruby's Scroll. Before the CCT's security system noticed and fried her virus, Monika got a location.

She Unpocketed a broomstick and took to the skies, and a few minutes later she touched down in…an amusement park? And not the creepy deserted kind, a totally normal one. Business was in full swing. *'The plot thickens?'* thought Monika as she Pocketed the broom. She closed her eyes again, turned her auditory sensitivity all the way up, winced before disconnecting the sensory-pain circuit,

and started scanning the sounds around her, looking for a familiar voice…

" *WHEEEEEEE!* " shrieked *two* familiar voices from a nearby ride, one of the tilt-a-whirl types.

Monika ran towards the ride, activating her omni-tool. *'Sorry folks, but this is an emergency,'* she thought as she hacked into the ride's control console and tripped the emergency shut-off. The air was rich with disappointed groans as the ride suddenly started slowing to a stop. She waited patiently until she saw Ruby get off, and sure enough there was another Penny with her. This one seemed much happier and carefree than the trio from earlier. She was then struck by an idea.

Monika deployed a stealth drone to keep tabs on the pair, and Pocketed herself. After a few minutes with a graphic design program and a digital matter synthesizer, she made an Atlesian military uniform from scratch, put it on, and Unpocketed herself. Following her drone's signal, Monika found Ruby and Penny at a concession stand. "Ms. Polendina," she said as she approached them. Penny looked up at her in surprise, and Ruby looked at her curiously. "Please pardon the interruption, but you need to come with me right away."

"Why?" asked Penny.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not at liberty to say in front of your friend. It's very urgent," Monika pressed.

"Sorry, but whatever it is, it couldn't possibly be more important to me than spending time with Ruby," Penny replied simply. Ruby blushed.

Monika sighed. "Sorry you feel that way, Penny." Then she grabbed Penny's arm and they both disappeared from Ruby's sight.

Inside her Pocket, Monika threw Penny against a wall and pinned her there with her foot on her chest. "No games, now. What are you, where's the real Penny Polendina, *and what the hell is going on* ?" she demanded.

For the first time, this Penny looked angry. "You interrupted my date with Ruby!" she yelled, pushing back against the wall. Monika hopped backwards, letting Penny stagger forward, and knocked her to the ground with a roundhouse kick. Then she pinned her to the floor with her foot.

"I strongly recommend you take this conversation more seriously," said Monika as she entered commands on her omni-tool. "If you don't answer my questions, I'm going to start hurting you, and I'd rather not. What are you? Where's the *real* Penny Polendina?"

"I *am* Penny Polendina!" the gynoid shrieked as she squirmed under Monika's foot.

"That so? What's my name, then?" Monika asked, removing her helmet so 'Penny' could see her face.

"What?! How should I know? I've never seen you before!"

"Didn't think so. And the three Pennys I met earlier didn't recognize me either, but they *did* know that Cinder Fall was an evil they needed to stop," said Monika. "None of you are the real Penny. You're fragments of her, if my hypothesis is right. Where's the *real* Penny? This is your last chance."

"Let me go!" the imposter wailed, "I need to be with Ruby!"

"I'm sorry," said Monika genuinely, "But that's the wrong answer." She pressed a key on her omni-tool, and the fake Penny under her foot started shrieking in pain, clutching her head. After a few seconds, Monika pressed another key and the imposter stopped screaming and went limp. "Tell me where the real Penny Polendina is, or I'll do it again, but at double the amplitude," Monika threatened.

"Yes, believe it or not, it can be even worse. The searing lights flashing without rhyme or reason, the hellish droning that makes you want to claw your ears out, not that it would help since I'm broadcasting directly into your brain."

"Why…who are you?" the imposter gasped.

"Someone who cares about Penny Polendina," said Monika. "I'm also someone who does terrible things to get what she wants, and what I want right now is to make sure my friend is alright. Also, that was the wrong answer," she added before hitting the key on her omni-tool again.

"No wai-ARRRRRGGGHH!" the imposter screamed, arching her back. Monika pressed her foot down, harder. She turned off the Overload program.

"I can't double it again, because the next one might break you, but there's still a lot of room to turn it up," Monika told her. "Tongue feeling any looser, yet?"

"I'll talk," the fake Penny whimpered, synthetic fluid leaking from her optical components. "I'll tell you where the others are, and the original Penny."

' *She's not real, she's not real, she's not real, she's just a fragment and the real Penny could be in danger,'* Monika told herself sternly. It didn't make her feel any better in the slightest. "Good," she said out loud, taking her foot off of her. "You'll take me to them, of course, but first I want you to explain what happened to Penny, and how you lot came to be."

…

Two days ago:

Penny had been working on it since the start of the loop, which had been difficult since Generuncle Jamie wasn't Awake and wouldn't

help her, but it was finished. A nice, secure, off-the-grid bunker on the outskirts of Vale, where Penny could safely carry out her experiment. Doing it in her Pocket would be much easier, but Penny couldn't pretend there wasn't a margin of error for this to go badly, and *if* it did, the damage would be limited to just this loop. *'This cognitive dissonance is driving me up the firewall,'* she thought to herself as she put the finishing touches on the machine that would facilitate her experiment. *'Trying to reconcile all the conflicting aspects of myself isn't working with everything coped up in my head. What this calls for is to talk my problems out* with *my problems,'* she reasoned. *'Talking it out with anyone else would be a waste of time, because frankly no one else is going to understand what I'm going through. Weiss tried, bless her heart, but…she's only human, after all. And loyal to Ruby before anything and everything else in the Multiverse, so can I really trust her to have* my *best interests at heart if those interests conflict with Ruby's? It feels awful to think of it that way, but…dammit I'm doing it again, thinking in circles. Let's get these quarreling voices out of my head so we can all clear the air.'*

With that settled, Penny hooked herself up to the machine, which was connected to ten pods that contained other gynoids, all inactive and identical to herself. Penny had decided to call them Applied Synthetic Psychological Engram Conversion Technoforms, or A.S.P.E.C.T.s for short. She started the machine up, and closed her eyes.

…

Presently:

"Eventually, Number Two convinced Prime to tell her who the evil ones were, and where and when to find them, and Number Eight and Number Ten went with her to…y'know, deal with them. Number Five and Number Nine stayed behind to keep Number Three from getting in the way, and the first chance I got I snuck away to be with my beloved Ruby," 'Penny A.S.P.E.C.T. Number Four' finished explaining as she led Monika to an abandoned building on the outskirts of the city of Vale.

"I can't believe she fragmented *herself* ," Monika muttered. "She's *been* to the Reds and Blues' Branch, hasn't she?"

Number Four furrowed her brow thoughtfully. "I'm not sure what you're talking about, but Penny-Prime didn't mean to separate us all permanently. The idea was just to talk through her problems with the only people who could ever possibly understand them; pieces of herself. Then Number Two kind of steered things in her own direction."

"That's not how that works though!" Monika exclaimed, "That's just a really convoluted echo chamber! Okay, no, that's unfair. It'd only *really* be an echo chamber if each copy was exactly the same. Still, you can't get an outside perspective from someone that came *from* you."

Number Four led Monika around to the back of the building, where there was a cellar door with another Penny A.S.P.E.C.T. sitting next to it, and another one picking flowers in the yard.

"That's Number Seven," said Number Four, pointing to the A.S.P.E.C.T. next to the cellar door, who jumped to her feet as soon as she noticed them. "She's Prime's sense of melancholy at being the only robot Looper from Remnant. And that's Number Six," she pointed to the flower gatherer. "She's…she just *really* enjoys existing in general."

"Salutations, Number Four and New Friend!" exclaimed Number Six, running up and shoving flowers into both of their arms.

"Who's this?" asked Number Seven, her voice a very odd blend of curiosity tinged with apathy and a suggestion of 'I should probably be hostile and distrustful of the stranger but I honestly just can't be bothered'. Monika thought she sounded like Sayori on a bad day.

"A fellow personoid," Monika replied, popping her right arm off to demonstrate her body's mechanical nature.

Number Seven gawked. "You…you're really a robot?! That's not just a prosthetic, is it?"

"I was born and raised in a computer, and this body is entirely inorganic," Monika confirmed. "I'm also a Looper, and a friend of Penny's, and I'm really worried about her. Would it be alright if I saw her?"

Number Seven frowned. "I…don't think that would be a good idea. Numbers Two, Eight, and Ten are still out gathering gear for the mission to Mistral, and Number Two said not to let anyone else see Prime."

"Um, Seven?" Number Four spoke up, "She *really* wants to see Penny-Prime. If you try to stop her, she'll just…go through you."

"She's right, you know," said Monika with a smile as she reattached her arm. "Listen, this 'aspect' business has gotten out of hand. Penny is an important friend to me, and I want to make sure she's well. First, I need to put her back together."

"Number Two isn't going to agree with this. Her mission isn't done yet," said Number Seven.

"Yeah, well, she and her mission both need to be stopped, anyhow," said Monika, "She's *killed* people."

"They were evil, though," said Number Seven, wringing her hands.

"Maybe, but they were still *people* . Legally executing criminals as mandated through the justice system is morally questionable as it is; going around *murdering* people you don't like is flat-out unethical. Penny would never sanction this, not if she were in her right mind. I've known her for millennia, so whatever has brought her to this point, I know it means she's in a bad place right now. I can't let this go on, I have to help my friend."

"And she's absolutely willing to hurt us if we stand in her way," Number Four added.

"So! Let's all agree to do what's best for Penny and all momentarily displaced aspects of her psyche, and head down to see her together like good buddies," said Monika brightly.

"That sounds *sensational* !" agreed Number Six, who skipped over to the cellar door and threw it open.

"…alright," Number Seven agreed glumly, "I wasn't enjoying being alone with my feelings, anyways."

"Believe it or not, I know exactly how it feels to have your entire being focused on how alone you feel," Monika said sympathetically, "And as such I can confirm: it really fucking sucks."

Monika and Numbers Four and Seven followed Six down into the cellar. The old, decrepit stairs abruptly ended at a shiny metal door with a retinal scanner on the lock, which Number Six opened. Beyond that was a sterile white room, much of which was dominated by computers and the machine Number Four had told Monika about. One Penny was sealed in one of the pods, and appeared to be unconscious. Four more Pennys, one of whom was wearing a very vibrant dress that made Monika think of a flamenco dancer, wear seated around a collapsible table playing cards. Well, three of them were, and the fourth was just staring into the middle distance. "Will the real Penny Polendina please stand up?" asked Number Six as they entered.

"Not that one?" asked Monika, pointing at the Penny-in-a-pod.

"No, that's Number Three, the one who didn't want to let Number Two go after the bad people," explained Number Four.

"Who is she and what is she doing here?!" demanded a Penny that jumped out of her seat at the card table.

"That's Number Five, representing Prime's suspicion that she might not be able to trust anyone but herself anymore, maybe," said Number Four. "And the one on a Scroll is Number Nine, Prime's sense of reason. The one in the snazzy dress is Number Eleven, Prime's sense of creativity, and the other one is Prime herself."

"Intruders at Base," said Number Nine into her Scroll. Then she closed it and jumped out of her chair, deploying her blades and setting them all to blaster-mode. Then she fired a volley at Monika, whose rebuttal was to sheathe herself in a mass effect field and slam into Number Nine, crossing the distance between them in an instant. Number Five threw herself at Monika, blades whirling, but then Number Eleven blindsided her, tackling her to the floor.

"Traitor!" the paranoid A.S.P.E.C.T. of Penny screamed.

"Hey, I'm not the one who pulled a coup on our mentally incontinent Prime," Number Eleven retorted as she got her fellow A.S.P.E.C.T. in a headlock. "Six! Let Three out!"

"Affirmative!" Number Six chirped, tra-la-la-ing over to the pod.

"Belay that!" shouted Monika as she grabbed the strings of Number Nine's swords and cut through them with an omni-blade. "You *all* need to get in your pods so I can undo whatever Penny did to herself to make you all. Penny, are you okay?!"

"Hmm?" asked the one Penny who was still seated. "Oh… salutations, Monika, I didn't notice you there," she said in a very 'no one's home right now, please leave a message' tone of voice.

"…okay, that's very distressing, but I'm going to fix everything soon. Everyone, *in your pods* !" she ordered.

"TRAITORS! You're all traitors! I couldn't even trust *myself* !" Number Five screamed as Eleven, Seven, and Four all forced her into her pod, while Six helped Monika with Nine.

"Thank goodness I didn't have to fight all of you," said Monika, once Nine and Five were electronically sedated and sealed in their pods. Seven, Six, and Four got into their pods without complaint.

"Yeah, well, none of us really want to be split up, anyways," said Number Eleven, "It…doesn't feel right, you know? I mean, Six could probably be happy with it, but she doesn't seem capable of not being happy."

"So what's the damage with the three that went rogue? And somehow convinced Paranoia *and* Rationality to side with them?" asked Monika as she hooked Penny back up to the machine.

"Well, Number Two is hellbent on fulfilling our–that is, Penny's–original purpose. Namely, to be a weapon that will save the world. Number Eight has a big chip on her shoulder on account of being a robot in a world run by Organics. And Number Ten…well, she's just anger. She's not even *angry* at anything, she's just made of anger. Or, more accurately, she's based on Prime's general sense of frustration. With herself, with everyone around her, yadda-yadda. But since none of us have access to Prime's memories as a Looper, Number Ten can't really put any faces or names to her frustration. She just has a huge seething ball of the stuff and no way to cope but to lash out at everything."

"One is Rage, one is Outrage, and they're both following Righteous Fury because it gives them an excuse to vent their vehemence violently," Monika surmised.

"Wow, that's pretty good," Number Eleven complimented her. "Hey, before I get in my pod, can you do me a favor?"

"Absolutely," said Monika readily. Then her eyes widened as Number Eleven started taking off her dress.

"Give this to Prime once she's herself again, alright?" said Number Eleven, tossing the dress on the table.

"S-sure," Monika stuttered. Number Eleven gave her a friendly wave before climbing into her pod, sealing herself in, and promptly passing out. Monika turned back to the real Penny, who was staring into space again. "Hey, Penny? You stay, right here, and I'll be back with…well, with the rest of you. Then I'll put you back in order and we're going to have a very serious talk, one girlbot to another. Okay?"

"Okay," said Penny distantly, with a sleepy non-expression.

Monika heard the roar of a Bullhead drawing near, and she hurried outside. On the way, she Unpocketed two pistols: the Quarian-made Arc Projector, and the Salarian-made Scorpion. Monika emerged from the cellar door, but didn't venture away from it until the Bullhead landed. She knew those things had guns on them, and as she hoped they didn't dare open fire on her with it while Penny-Prime and the other A.S.P.E.C.T.s were behind her. The trio of murderous sub-Pennys hopped out of the Bullhead, and Monika fully emerged to face them.

30.5 – Clash of Philosophies!, by YukiAkuma.

Flashes of light and sparks filled the club room. The sound of lightsabers clashing reverberated off the windows.

"A Sith cannot forgive such insults, she-devil!" Sayori cried as she leapt at Yuri, red lightsaber bouncing off Yuri's own violet blade. Sayori then thrust her hand out, Force Pushing Yuri into the far wall.

"I won't apologise for my beliefs!" came the response from the purple-haired swordswoman. She parried Sayori's next blow effortlessly, before sidestepping the Sith to aim a quick slice with the sickle in her off-hand at Sayori's unprotected flank. A sudden burst of telekinetic force blasted the two apart.

"So…" Monika said to Natsuki as she took a seat at the far end of the club room. "Do I want to know?"

"Oh, Yuri just criticised one of Sayori's poems," Natsuki responded, idly munching on potato chips.

"All I said was that you could use more synonyms!" Yuri argued while performing an acrobatic dodge off of the ceiling.

"The repetition is the POINT!" came Sayori's rejoinder as she brought her blade up to meet Yuri's downward swing.

"…should we stop them?" Monika asked as a chunk of desk bounced harmlessly off her kinetic barrier.

"Eh. They'll wear themselves out eventually," Natsuki replied breezily. "Chip?"

30.6 – You Think You Know A Group…, by Masterweaver.

Yuri opened her bedroom door, took one look into the clubroom, and shut it. "Nope." She spun on her heel and flung herself into her bed. "Nope, *nope,* nope, *nope,* **nope."**

The phone on her desk buzzed.

"Nuh-uh. Nope."

It buzzed again.

"Not playing along."

It picked up. "Yuri, come on out."

"No, Monika, I'm not going to–"

"Yuri," Natsuki said, "I'm seriously considering giving Monika permission to force-code you out here."

"What?"

"Look, just…" Sayori sighed. "We need to do this."

Yuri groaned, pulling a pillow onto her face. "This is completely ridiculous and an over-exaggeration."

"Maybe," Monika conceded, "but can you at least hear us out?"

For a moment, Yuri stared at the silk of her pillowcase.

Then she rose with a loud moan, throwing the pillow into the wall. "Fine, whatever." Grumbling under her breath, she stalked out into the clubroom and glared at the banner marked 'Intervention'. "What is it *this* time?"

"We've been comparing notes and…weeeeeeell…" Sayori cringed. "You seem to be starting fights just to have a physical fight."

Monika started counting off on her fingers. "Taunting my hair to have us fight with combs, insulting Sayori's poetry style to get her to go all out on you, and whatever you and Natsuki have got going on–"

Natsuki huffed. "Look, lovers' quarrels are between lovers. But she does have a point. You're getting in fights…a lot more than the rest of us."

"And that's fine!" Sayori assured quickly. "You have a fire in your blood, that's perfectly alright. But, you know, we'd appreciate it if instead of looking for a reason to fight and causing conflict, you just tell us you want to have a throwdown instead of riling us up."

Yuri blinked. "Wait…that's what this intervention is for?"

"Yes," Natsuki said, confused. "What else would it be for?"

"…I…honestly didn't know," Yuri admitted. "Huh. O…kay, then…I guess…I'll try to have less, uh, provoking manner and just…set up a sparring ring?"

"That would be lovely." Monika stretched. "Okay, I think we're done here!"

30.7 – Mechanical Hearts: heart2heart, by Skaz Wolfman.

(DDLC)/(RWBY)

On the outskirts of the capital city of the Kingdom of Vale, in the yard outside a deserted farmhouse, under the first handful of stars in the twilight sky, with a faint orange glow far to the west to mark the sun's passing, one gynoid face three others who were identical to an unwell friend of hers. Bringing them to heel, whether by peaceful or violent means, was necessary to make that friend well again.

"Automatons, borne from Wrath, Pride, and Righteous Indignation; fractured aspects of a wounded soul," Monika said to the three Penny A.S.P.E.C.T.s. "Go thee back from whence thee came, and pray let that be the end of this sad affair. If nay, says thee, I shall be obliged to fight. With a gun full of justice," she held up the Scorpion, "and a gun full of mercy," she held up the Arc Projector, "for I cannot abide the presence of evil."

That proclamation broke something in the leading A.S.P.E.C.T., designated Number Two, who broke into a charge at Monika with a sword in each hand, screaming a battle cry. The one designated Number Eight jumped up onto the Bullhead parked in the yard, deployed her swords and started charging up a powerful energy beam. Number Ten also deployed her swords, and sprinted around to Monika's left side. Monika crossed her arms, aiming the Arc Projector at Eight and the Scorpion at the ground between herself and Two. Squeezing both triggers, Monika peppered the ground with microgrenades and fired a powerful lance of electricity at Eight. Eight's Aura fully shielded her from the blast, but sparks arced between her swords and destabilized the charged-up energy; consequentially, it blew up in her face and sent her tumbling off of the Bullhead. Between the shock, the boom, and the fall, her Aura broke.

Two noticed the dimly-glowing balls Monika had fired at the ground, and wisely skidded to a halt. Two swords floated up out of her back, and she launched them at the building behind Monika, and thereby

pulled herself through the air over the miniature minefield. Ten sent four of her swords flying forward, stabbing them into the ground around Monika, and used them to pull herself forward for a flying punch that might have torn Monika in half, if it connected. Instead, Monika jumped up and threw a kick at Two as she passed overhead. Two blocked the kick with one of her swords, the other shifting into blaster mode; she shot Monika at close range. Meanwhile, her strings were still pulling them towards the farmhouse. Monika jumped up, kicking off from Two's sword, and vaulted over her. Two struck the house feet first, detached her swords, and kicked off towards Monika. At the same time, Ten launched her swords at Monika, but they all bounced off her biotic barrier. Monika Pocketed her guns and threw one hand at Two, hitting her with a biotic Push that slammed her back into the farmhouse. Then she raised her omni-tool and launched a Cryo Blast at her, freezing her to the side of the house.

Monika landed on the ground in a crouch, next to the head of the Bullhead, and Ten tried to charge her again. She ran right into the little field of microgrenades, and was promptly blown into the air. Monika threw a mass effect field around Ten and Pulled her back down, slamming her into the ground with enough force to break her Aura. Then a voice behind Monika screamed "DIE!" and Monika whirled around just in time to catch Eight's energy beam head-on. It sent her flying backwards, burning through the rest of her Barrier and a good chunk of her Aura.

"Get the others!" Two shouted. Monika looked up, and saw that the ice on and around her was thawing out quickly. *'Must be heating her body up.'* Then she saw Eight sprinting for the cellar door.

"No!" Monika shouted, Unpocketing a heavy pistol and sitting up; she slowed down her perception of time to line up her shot, and squeezed the trigger. With one shot, she blew out both of Eight's knees, sending her sprawling out on the grass.

"NO!" screamed Two, who tore herself free of the house and hit the ground running, straight for Monika. Monika fired at her, but she

blocked every shot with her swords. The rest of her swords emerged from her back in blaster-mode and opened fire, shipping away at Monika's Aura.

"That's it, Sci-Fi Hour is over," Monika grunted, Pocketing the pistol and Unpocketing her wand. " *Impedimenta!* " she cried. Two lurched to a near halt, as if she had ran headlong into an invisible blob of molasses. " *Sectumsempra!* " she shouted, waving her wand high overhead in a horizontal arc; the strings of Two's swords all snapped, and they fell to the ground behind her. " *Expelliarmus!* " she thrust her wand at Two, and the swords in her hands flew away from her just as the Impediment Jinx wore off and she stumbled forward. Finally, Monika brandished her wand and gravely incanted, " *Imperio.* "

She felt her willpower flow down wand arm and through the air, into Two…whereupon her senses were obliterated by the mental equivalent of crashing into a steel wall at a hundred miles per hour. Before she could recover, a fist slammed into her face, which similarly felt like getting hit by a car going a hundred miles per hour. Monika's Aura shattered as she was sent flipping backward. She staggered up to her feet, just in time for Two to Spartan kick her in the chest, slamming her back into the side of the Bullhead. Still disoriented from having her will break against the sheer adamant conviction of Two's righteousness, and then getting her braincase rattled, Monika was momentarily helpless as Two drove a sword through her midsection with enough force to left her off her feet. Two let go and stepped back, and when she didn't fall down Monika realized she had been pinned to the Bullhead.

Silver lining, the simulated pain and accompanying cavalcade of systems warnings going off in her head brought her back into stark focus. She observed that Two was leaping at her with her other sword poised to stab her through the chest. Magic momentarily forgotten, Monika defaulted to what she knew best. *'Need a gun, need a gun, NEED A BIG GUN'* she thought frantically. Her Claymore, a Krogan shotgun with too much recoil for an ordinary

human to safely fire, appeared in one of her hands, and without thinking she raised it at hip level and fired. Monika and Two both cried out in pain as the former felt the motors in her left arm shatter from the Claymore's immense recoil, and the latter was sent flying backwards, her right arm blown very uncleanly off. Two landed on her back, and didn't try to get up. Monika's left arm dangled at her side, dead below the elbow, and the Claymore slipped from her grip. She found the presence of mind to Pocket it before it fell too far away.

Number Ten got up out of her crater. Monika, remembering the wand in her right hand, raised it and said hoarsely, " *Petrificus Totalus.* " Ten's legs snapped together, her arms snapped to her sides, and she went stiff as a board. She didn't fall backward, rather seeming to stand at attention so rigidly it could make a drill sergeant weep tears of joy. Monika grabbed the hilt of the sword that was impaling her, and yanked it out, falling down and landing heavily on her knees. Then, she forced herself up to her feet. "The things I do for friendship," Monika muttered to herself. "And to validate my self-worth. Can't forget that one." She stepped over to Number Two's side. "You fought well, would-be Battle Angel, but the fight's over. I'm going to reintegrate you all back into Penny, okay? And I hope her conscience can bear the burden of what you've done on her behalf."

"Weapons don't need conscience," Two retorted, "They only need a target, and my target–"

"Is evil, yes, I know. Well, in what little time you have left, here's something for you to chew on: weapons, by definition, have no knowledge of or inclination towards good or evil. Only people can know and choose between good and evil, and any person who would enforce their perspective on the subject upon all other people, at any cost and with no regard for their autonomy, is an evil person by virtue of having no respect for the free will of others. *Petrificus Totalus, Locomotor Robot* ," said Monika, Body-Binding Number Two and levitating her a few inches off the ground. She transported her down

into the cellar, and put her in her pod. Then she went back for Number Eight, and then for Number Ten.

With all ten of Penny's A.S.P.E.C.T.s and what was left of Penny herself all hooked up to the machine, Monika started the reintegration process. Then she sat down and let her body's self-repair systems run while she waited.

…

Monika opened her eyes when she heard crying. She checked to make sure her body was fully repaired, and it was, and then she got up and walked over to Penny, who was still plugged into the machine. Saying nothing and moving carefully, Monika disconnected her from the machine, and silently coaxed her to her feet. Quite suddenly, Penny grabbed onto her and hugged her tightly. Monika stood still, and hugged Penny back. "It's over, Penny. You're going to be alright. None of it was you, really. They were fragments, incomplete minds and hearts, and you're more than the sum of those pieces."

They both jumped when a blade of red light stabbed through the bunker door and quickly cut a circle. Then the circle fell in and Sayori jumped into the room, wild-eyed. She took in the sight of Monika and Penny, and she looked livid for a split second. Monika *felt* the anger wash over her. Then Sayori looked confused, putting her hands on her hips and cocking an eyebrow. "Okay, I know you both well enough to know this isn't what it looks like, so…the heck is going on? Wait, are you both even Awake?"

"I'm Anchored and she's having a bad Loop, yes," Monika confirmed.

' *I can help but notice Penny's feels are an absolute fustercluck right now. Does this have anything to do with Roman Torchwick's murder being on the news this evening?'* Sayori spoke into Monika's mind. Monika nodded. *'Oh…um…what can I do to help?'*

"Just go back to Beacon and cover for me. Tell Yuri and Natsuki not to worry about me, I'll be back as soon as I can," Monika told her.

Sayori threw a crisp salute. "Yes, Madam President! Sayo, outro!" she said before hopping back out.

Monika let go of Penny. "Can we talk about it, or do you need time to process?"

"I…I'm very grateful for what you did, Monika, but…is *not* talking about it an option?" Penny asked her meekly.

Monika shook her head. "Your mind is a mess, my friend. You have issues, and your issues have subroutines with issues of their own. You pulled an Alpha Fragmentation *on yourself* and…no, sorry, but I'm not shitty enough of a friend to just walk away from this. You need to talk to *someone* about this, and Ruby and Weiss aren't Awake, and I'm here. I mean, Sun is also Awake, if you'd rather talk to him."

"He wouldn't understand," said Penny sadly.

"Do you want me to call Sayori back and tag out with her?" Monika offered.

"I…no. No, you've already seen enough; if I *have* to talk to someone, it may as well be you, I guess," Penny mumbled.

"I thank you for your ringing endorsement," Monika said with a straight face.

Penny blushed. "S-sorry…"

"I'm going out for some fresh air," Monika announced, walking towards the door. "Come and talk to me when you've got your thoughts in order. Please don't make me wait longer than you have to."

"Okay."

…

Monika had been laying out on the grass, staring up into the night sky, for almost two hours before Penny emerged from the cellar. She sat down next to Monika, knees drawn to her chest. "You did a real number on some of them," she remarked. "You even *tortured* one of them." Her tone wasn't entirely judgmental. It was mostly surprised and a little confused. "I know about your Baseline, but you've always seemed so far removed from that person that I've never thought of you as her."

"But I *am* her, Penny," Monika replied with a slightly melancholy tone. "That person was, and still is, and always will be, me. No matter what I do, I'll never be anyone but who I am. I'm not a good person, not the way Ruby is. I'm just a person who does what she feels she has to do, however I can. I may not like some of the things Cinder does, but I have to give her this: she's at peace with who she is. That's more than a lot of good people can say for themselves."

"But you do good things," said Penny. "If you do good, doesn't that make you good?"

"That's a very pragmatic way of thinking. I once thought I was doing a very good thing, but all I did was hurt everyone involved and get deleted for my troubles," said Monika. "So, yeah. It's all good and well to want to be a good person and stand steadfast against the forces of evil…but anyone who seriously believes they're all-good and righteous in everything they do is disconnected from reality in some way. Whether they're naïve, mentally challenged, arrogant, or just insane. To really, truly know the difference between right and wrong means that, at least sometimes, you're not going to be certain which one you are. Even Kal-El has his days of self-doubt. But you're a lot older and presumably therefore wiser than I am, so you should already know that. What's *really* got your logic circuits in a knot?"

"I guess I'm just feeling very conflicted, these days," said Penny, turning her eyes up to the stars. "Part of me is certain…I know I'm a

person, and therefore not purely a weapon, but I *was* made to be a weapon against evil. My purpose is to protect the world. Most people stumble through life looking for a purpose, but I was made with one, and it's a purpose I truly *want* to fulfill. But how can I when there's evil in my family? Cinder, Roman, Neo, and Raven may have restrained themselves somewhat, and we may have a set of nebulous rules in place about what is and isn't going too far, but that doesn't change the fact that they're thieves and killers! I can't just ignore that, or else I betray my purpose. But if I fulfill my purpose, and punish the evil-doers in our family, than I alienate myself and cause tension in that family. Ruby and Yang are both very dear to me, and they love Cinder as a sister; if I make war against Cinder, I hurt them, and if I don't I hurt myself, and if I try to force Cinder to conform to *my* morals then I'm inviting a repeat of the worst loop in the history of our Branch."

"It definitely sounds like something has to give," Monika agreed. "Classic Mulan Dilemma: torn between your honor and your heart. Maybe Ren could help you figure it out?"

Penny scoffed. "I know what Ren would say. Family is more important to him than anything else. His whole sense of purpose is built on his love for Nora, Jaune, and Pyrrha, and to the rest of us to a slightly lesser degree. But if that were my answer, I wouldn't feel so conflicted about it!"

"Number Two embodied your desire to stop evil, and Number Three, the one who most wanted to stop her, embodied your desire to protect your family. But they weren't the only aspects you shunted off," Monika observed. "Number Four embodied your love for Ruby, and Number Five embodied your suspicion that people are lying to you. From that, would it be correct of me to infer that there's trouble in paradise?"

Penny flinched, and hugged her knees more tightly. "No one's told you yet?"

"Nope. What happened?"

"We…we've been on a break. For several loops."

"Ouch. Well, your guys' relationship is your business and none of mine, so I won't stick my nose in without an invitation. I hope you two figure it out, one way or another…but since this is obviously part of your internal cavalcade of confliction, might I inquire as to the cause for this break?"

"The long and short of it is that our relationship didn't feel entirely genuine to me," Penny sighed, "I wasn't sure if her heart was really in it, or if she was just *roleplaying* as my girlfriend to make me happy. And she as good as admitted to my face that she'd have dated Sun if he had asked her first."

"Whoa, hold on," said Monika, sitting up to face her. "That first thing, the wondering if Ruby was serious about it, that's totally a valid reason to doubt your relationship. That's serious, heavy stuff. But the thing about Sun is totally *not* valid. Anyone in their right mind with an attraction to men would be damn lucky to be with him. He's fun, he's funny, he's fun-loving, he's cute, he's charming, he's kind of a badass, he's got a casual air that makes him super-approachable but he also has the depth of a true philosopher buried in that…you kind of have to be fluent in 'dudebro speak' to recognize it for what it is, but it's there. And I dare to presume that you've noticed *dem abs* ? Between you and me if I weren't celibate I'd climb that monkey-ass in a doki-doki."

Penny raised an eyebrow at Monika, who blushed and cleared her throat. "What I'm trying to say is, I don't think you should be upset specifically because Ruby *could* have become Sun's girlfriend if things had played out differently. That's…there are a lot of people Ruby *could* have been with instead, but she chose to be with *you* . Doubt her sincerity if you have to, but that fact is still telling. I've heard legends and fables about Ruby Rose's billions-of-years-long celibacy streak. But she ended it to be with you."

"That's not *entirely* accurate–"

"Right, whatever, you were a cuddles-only couple, *my point is* , Ruby was a merry spinster for eons, if Blake and Weiss are reliable sources of Ruby-lore, and she ended that specifically to be with you. Yes, maybe she only did it because you wanted to be with her and she wanted to make you happy, and it's reasonable for you to doubt her sincerity for that reason, because no one who isn't an asshole wants a relationship to be entirely about what *they* want, BUT the fact that you're the first and only Looper she's ever volunteered to be romantically involved with is *still* a telling detail. That's all I'm saying."

"For saying my relationship isn't your business, you have a lot of thoughts on the subject," Penny noted with a small smile.

Monika's blush deepened. "Sorry. I'm a very opinionated person and I have a hard time shutting myself up once I get rolling. I really do try not to interfere in other people's relationships unless asked to. I mean, there was the Yuri/Natsuki thing but that was different. I actually do have a responsibility for their happiness and all that jazz. On that subject, please never repeat anything I said about Sun to any of my friends, please?"

"Okay," Penny readily agreed. "But I have to ask; you just made it clear that you're not asexual, so why are you celibate?"

"Combination of my lingering guilt complex and fear of relapsing into yandere tendencies," Monika replied curtly. "At once I both feel that I don't deserve that kind of relationship and fear what I might do if I *were* to fall in love again. It *really* didn't shake out in my favor last time. I really think there's a nomination for the All-Time Top Ten Epic Fails in Romance in there. But we're not here to discuss my neurotic ass, we're discussing the snarl of inner turmoil that lead to you psychologically vivisecting yourself to figure your shit out. That's a *really* weird flex for someone who's lucky enough to have a legitimate therapist in her Branch, and a Jedi at that."

"Weiss means well and all, but she's…okay, this is going to sound like crazy talk, but there's really no better way to say it. She's 'one of them'. You know, an Organic. What's more, I just, somehow I'm not

entirely sure I can trust her to be *really* impartial in situations where Ruby's interests are involved."

"Kinda harsh, but not entirely unfair. Ruby and Weiss *are* the tightest pair of non-romantic life partners I've ever seen," Monika allowed. "And I can't blame you for the other thing, either; I myself have questioned if Organics and Synthetics can truly understand each other across the gap between their experiences. That being said, if you ever meet the Ryder Twins, they come about as close as any Organics I've ever met, Looping or otherwise. And while Sayori tends to identify with Organics more than Synthetics, she also has a legitimate Doctorate in Droid Psychology from some big-wig academy on Coruscant." Monika blinked. "Hey, that's a good point. Sayori's a Force Sensitive too, maybe it would be worth hearing her opinion?"

"…maybe," Penny said tentatively. "Maybe later. I don't know."

"Alright, next pair of aspects, Six and Seven. Your sheer existential joy of being alive and engaging with the world around you, and your sense of solitude at being Remnant's sole sapient Synthetic, not to mention being the only Synthetic Looper from your Branch. What's going on there? I mean, I know Synthetics and Organics are kind of apples and oranges in a good few ways, but do you really feel *that* isolated from the people who care about you, Penny? I had thought Ruby had put the kibosh on that way of thinking the day she found out you weren't human."

"She made it clear that I shouldn't let my artificiality make me feel *sub* -human," Penny clarified. "And it's not really a critical issue, compared to the Ruby thing and the Evil thing. It's just something that cycles in and out of my mind. And it's not that each pair of my ASPECTs represent a distinct confliction; just Two and Three, really. The rest were more complexly interconnected."

"Fair enough. Well, we could go on talking all night, and we will if that will help, but is there anything I can do to help you out more tangibly?" Monika asked.

Penny replied with a prolonged sigh and fell back onto the grass. "I don't know. I have no idea what I want to do. I know I *want* to be with Ruby again, because she makes me happy, and I *want* to be happy again. But I don't want it to be a shallow happiness. I want to know it will be *real* this time. The obvious solution is to talk about it with Ruby, of course, but…well, I've kind of been avoiding that as best as I can. I'm afraid she'll beg me to take her back and I'll cave because…you know…"

"Because Ruby Rose has one of the most potent sadfaces in the Multiverse. I've noticed," said Monika sympathetically.

"Yes. Especially since I feel the way I do about her; seeing her sad *hurts* . I don't have a doubt in my mind that *I* love *her* , I just wish I could be sure that she really, truly loves me back."

"I have a philosophy on the idea of 'true love'…ehh, actually, never mind, you wouldn't want to hear it," said Monika.

"Let me guess; you don't believe in it. Well, speaking as someone who doesn't have endocrine glands, just a soul, I'm fairly confident that love is more than just a chemical reaction," said Penny.

"Oh, I certainly believe in love as something that exists beyond the realm of chemistry," Monika assured her, "But…like, the idea of 'true love' or 'soul mates'? That, I'm pretty sure, is bogus. Given the right circumstances, I think that almost any two people can fall in love. One of the biggest, deepest, most primal fears human beings have is being Alone. Not just alone, but *Alone* with a capital A. That, combined with fear of the unknown, is why most people have a crippling fear of death. Because most people don't know what will happen to their sense of self after they shuffle off the mortal coil, and aside from eternal torture and total oblivion, one of the bigger fears is that we just wind up completely alone and cut off from everyone else. Most sapient beings crave social interaction, at the very least. To have our existence and value acknowledged by other beings. And beyond that, many sapient beings, and certainly most humans, have a strong hunger for affection, at the very least. Despite being, at my

core, a being born from code, I too have that deep, aching need for intimacy and affection. Rotting eternities, there have been days when all I can do is lay in my bed trying not to think about how badly I…need…" Monika trailed off into awkward silence. Intellectually, she knew the redness in her face was the result of emotive emulation firmware, and that the burning heat in her face was purely in her imagination. "Sorry, Penny. Fuck, I'm so damned self-centered. This isn't helping you at all."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Penny said mildly. "If nothing else, you're giving me something to think about. My thoughts have been pretty self-centered, too, since Ruby and I…anyways, not that it's any of my business, but I really think your celibacy is doing you more harm than good."

"Oh, oh-ho-ho, Penny, my friend, *trust me* , I know very well just how painful my celibacy is," said Monika. "But, here again, the last time I had a crush, I killed people. Sorry, no, but for now my celibacy is what's best."

"For now?" asked Penny, sitting up again.

"No, not for *now* , for *me* ," said Monika.

"But you said 'for now'," said Penny.

Monika frowned. "Noooo, I'm pretty sure I said 'for me, my celibacy is what's best.'"

"And I'm absolutely certain you said," Penny's voice was abruptly replaced by a recording of Monika's voice, " *for now my celibacy is what's best.* "

"…whatever, slip of the tongue. I know what I meant," Monika said sternly.

"I'm sure you do," said Penny, traces of humor creeping into her voice as she laid back down on the grass.

"Hey, I'm not the one who went through a crisis today, you are. Let's stay focused, shall we?"

Penny sighed. "I'm really not sure talking is going to resolve anything, here. I'll give Ruby another chance when I'm sure that she really means to be with me because she wants to be with me like I want to be with her. But I can't be at peace with myself as long as I'm torn between my duty and my family, and I don't see any way to resolve *that* conflict without compromising myself in some way."

"I mean…yeah, that's pretty much exactly what's up. I know what I would do, if it were me; I'd just revise my definition of 'evil' to exclude the people I care about. You know that joke, 'a friend will help you move furniture, but a best friend will help you move a body'? I decided a very long time ago that I owe it to my friends, who suffered at my hands, to do anything and everything they need of me. Whatever they want to do, no matter how I feel about it, I'm down. And before you say anything, yes, I know, that's kind of messed up. But that's how I somewhat cope with my guilt complex. Obviously, that's not going to work for *you* . Your guilt doesn't come from something you did, but from the conflict between your ideals."

"Ruby has a philosophy that we, Loopers that is, exaggerate the importance or magnitude of some of our personality traits. Using them as points of internal consistency, grounding us in ourselves, to protect us from losing our sense of self in the seemingly endless march of time," said Penny. "Ruby's love of sweets, as an example. In my case, I'm torn between two of my biggest 'deals', you might say. Protecting the world on one hand, and my friends on the other. If I definitively prioritize one over the other, I'll no longer be the Penny Polendina I've always been. I'll be someone else. I know I have to choose one, or risk going mad, but becoming someone else…it scares me, Monika."

"You're not going to become someone else," Monika countered. "Whoever they are, people *are* who they are, all the way down. You, me, Ruby; none of us can ever change who we are, just how we act. The reason we're all in this Looping business is because souls are

the most stable things in existence, apparently. If changing yourself were possible, I'd have done it myself. So don't worry about losing yourself, or anything. Just do what feels right."

"But that's my whole problem! Whatever I do that conflicts with one of those ideals feels *wrong* . I don't want to act against my friends, but I don't want to forsake my purpose, either," Penny lamented.

"Then change your perspective on your purpose," said Monika, standing up and then offering Penny a hand. "Being happy doesn't come from fulfilling a predestined or designated purpose. Being happy comes from doing what you want to do."

Penny narrowed her eyes, and got up without taking Monika's hand. "That's a very selfish attitude to have, and one that you clearly don't believe in applying to yourself, given your guilt complex."

"That's where you're wrong, old friend," said Monika with a smile. "It's not guilt that drives me to do for others, it just makes it impossible to say no to my friends. Call it whatever you want, but selfishness *is* the way to happiness. You can still serve others, of course, but do it because it's what you want, not because you think you're obligated to do so. You may have been created as a weapon, but you have free will and you can choose your targets." Monika put a hand on Penny's shoulder, and then walked past her. "I'm heading back to Beacon now, so my friends aren't worrying about me all night. You could probably use some time to process things. Sayori and I will hang out with you tomorrow after classes, okay?"

"Okay," Penny said with a sigh. She headed back down into the cellar to dismantle the machine.

30.8 – Book Fort, by Master_Spoiler.

"…it almost feels like a chore, compared to all the other entertainment we ha–" Monika Awoke mid-sentence. "–ve. Wait, what?"

She quickly took note of her surroundings, and her heart sank. It was too late. The room was already empty. She was sitting at a desk, chin resting on her hands. She glanced over her shoulder, and saw the familiar orange-and-blue pattern outside the windows.

Monika sighed. She hated when this happened. As an Anchor, she was used to Loops when she was the only Awake Literature Club member, but usually she Awoke early enough to redirect the story to a happier outcome. But by this point in the game, that wasn't really an option. All her friends had been deleted, and even if she brought them back she was unsure whether or not they would forgive her Unawake self's actions. At this point there wasn't much she could do except sit around and wait for the Loop to end.

"Ugh…" Monika rested her head on the table. Depending on the Variant, the Loop could go on for an indefinite amount of time. Sometimes it just stopped after a few hours of nothing. Sometimes it would continue until the "Player" moved the plot along, if they even existed. She could recreate the school, she supposed. Or create a simulation to keep herself entertained while she passed the time. She had done both before, and many other actions. But that didn't change the fact that she was essentially alone at the end of the world.

But then…she noticed something she hadn't before. Technically speaking, as a computer program she didn't have a "periphery", she just perceived all the information she needed to instantaneously when necessary. How she had missed this earlier, she had no idea. But now it had her full, undivided attention.

It was a small closed-off structure, made entirely out of books.

It was rather elaborate for a book fort, Monika had to admit. There were turrets and buttresses constructed from biographies. Sturdy walls made of encyclopedias. A tower in the back made entirely out of fantasy novels. There were even little banners made of bookmarks hanging off the fort walls, and somehow a bunch of paperbacks had been precariously balanced to make a roof. As

Monika stood and walked over to examine it, she wondered who had made it. Certainly not one of the other girls. Her Unawake self had no memories of the fort so it must have been built recently, while she had been distracted talking to the "Player".

"Oh, are you done now?" Her thoughts were interrupted to her shock by a familiar face poking out of the fort's entrance. Or rather a familiar lack of a face. Monika's eyes widened.

"Hiroaka?" She asked, perplexed. Was there a glitch in the game or something?

"Who?" The blank-faced protagonist seemed just as confused as she was.

If anything, this response just made Monika feel even more weirded out. "Um. Hiroaka. That's your name, isn't it?"

"Is it?" The boy's voice indicated no change in expression. "You called me something else before. At least, I think you were referring to me."

That made sense, Monika supposed. Hiroaka's name was entirely dependent on what the "Player" called him. It was perfectly logical that her Unawake self would call him something other than the name the Looping Club members knew him by. Still, what was he doing walking around? Even if he displayed autonomy in some other loops, what little personality he had was usually completely erased by this point in the game. She decided to prod a bit more. "Maybe I did. It's not really important. But what do you mean, 'before'? How much do you remember?"

"Not much." Hiroaka admitted. "I know I found myself at the desk. I know you were talking to someone. I thought you were talking to me at first, but then I stood up and you didn't notice, so I figured you were talking to someone else. But you aren't doing that now. That's what I was asking earlier. Are you done now?"

He must mean how my Unawake self was talking to the "Player", Monika thought. "Do you remember the other girls? Sayori? Natsuki and Yuri?"

"Who?" There was that confused tone of voice again. "I told you. I found myself at the desk with you. I don't remember anything else. And I haven't noticed anyone else come in. I'm not sure they could. When I checked the door, it didn't go anywhere. Are those people important?"

He really doesn't know anything, Monika realized. He's quite literally a blank slate after the game was reset! "Not really," she explained to him. "Not right now. Not to you."

"Oh. Ok."

"And in answer to your earlier question," Monika added, "Yes, I'm done talking to that person. I really should have stopped earlier, but I suppose it took me some time to 'get over it'. Out of curiosity, how long was I…talking to them?"

Hiroaka shrugged. "I don't know. The clock isn't moving. Maybe a couple hours. Enough time for me to build this." He gestured to the book structure.

"You made this?" Monika asked, surprised.

"Yes." He responded with a tone carrying the feeling of "Who else could have built it?" which Monika figured was justified since there was nobody else present to create such a structure.

"Ah. It looks…good. Nice buttresses. I didn't realize you had such an eye-er, perception? for small details."

"Thanks. Neither did I." For a moment, it seemed that if Hiroaka had a face he would be beaming with pride. Interesting. "I needed something to do," he elaborated, "And the books were really the only thing I could do anything with."

"Ah." Externally, Monika's face was a mask of calm, but internally she was extremely uncertain about what to do next. She never really talked with the protagonist, even in Variants in which he had more autonomy. That was more Sayori's thing. Monika really didn't know what she and Hiroaka would talk about. In baseline, she had destroyed him. Not exactly a good conversation starter. She supposed she could leave him to his own devices and do something else, but that seemed kind of…sad, to leave him in the room all by himself.

"So…" she decided to remain on the current topic of conversation. That was easier. "The fort. Are you going to keep adding to it or…?"

"I can't." The boy's shoulders slumped. "I'm out of books. There's nothing else I can do to it."

Monika looked around, and indeed, all the bookshelves in the classroom were vacant. Every last book had been repurposed for literature architecture. It was a sobering image to look at. A boy, unrecognized bv the universe around him, attempting to leave his mark on the world, yet only to be restricted in the end, unable to accomplish anything more. It kind of reminded her of herself, at least in baseline. Not recognized by the game as a romantic interest, she had attempted to make herself significant in the eyes of the player, only to be thwarted in the end by the limits of the game's code. It was only in the Loops where she had actually been able to grow, and develop, and gain real significance in the universe. And Hiroaka didn't have that. The Club wasn't sure if a Looping Hiroaka was even possible.

But then an idea sprung into her mind. Hiroaka may not have the Loops, but right here, right now, in this Variant, he did have her. Or more specifically, the vast library she contained in her Pocket, and all the copies of books she could program into existence. She smiled.

"You know, I think I can obtain more books for you," she said hesitantly. Hiroaka's head looked up at her. "But, if I get you more

books…will you let me help you build the fort? I happen to know a bit about construction."

Although Hiroaka had no mouth, Monika was certain he was smiling. "Yeah. I'd like that. I'd like that a lot."

30.9 – His Biggest Fan, by Tetradrachm.

(DDLC)/(JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Battle Tendency)

(Note: This is a very Early Loop of Natsuki's; takes place sometime after Snip 2.6, at least.)

New York, New York. The City that Never Sleeps. The Big Apple. Gotham.

From a certain perspective, Joseph Joestar had lived in the city for millions of years, but each time he got off the boat at the start of the Loop it felt fresh to him.

Or maybe it was just the cold breeze.

But either way, it was great to be back home after that last, long Fused Loop with Lucky Star. He hated it when the Tree took a look at his age and stuck him in a school setting…

At any rate, this Loop was bright and new and Joseph planned on taking full advantage. He hadn't done a political career in a while; Mayor of New York had a nice ring to it…

But first, he needed to go down his usual, first night checklist: Save Smokey, kill Straizo, and then flip a coin with Caesar (if he was Awake) to see who'd go deal with the Pillar Men. Smokey had wanted to give it a go, too, but considering that Smokey hadn't even had a Fused Loop yet made Joseph wary. If Kars got the Red Stone of Aja, the rest of the Loop was always a massive pain in the—

The sound of fighting and screaming hit him as he came around a corner. It was usually around here that he ran into Smokey, who tried

to make off with his wallet if he was Unawake or pranked him a different way if he was Awake. Well, tried to; Joseph always dodged the prank one way or another—except for that one time with the fish. So either this was another prank, or something was different this Loop.

He rounded the next corner to a small alleyway and spotted a tiny pink-haired girl beating on one of the usual thuggish types you saw around this part of town with a baseball bat.

"Fucking creep!" she screamed, slamming the wooden bat into the brute's shoulder, who winced with pain. "Thought you could cop a feel, huh? Well, feel this!" She smacked the man's chest and he staggered.

"Hey, you need some help?" Joseph asked as he got closer. If this was a prank, he wasn't sure just how yet. He needed a closer look.

"No, I've got this—fucking pervert—" the girl continued, still facing away from him as briefly switched to kicking at his shins instead.

Joseph abruptly remembered that women of this era usually didn't swear so colorfully, or for that matter have such colorful hair. That last Loop had confused his perceptions of what was normal. "Hey, us Loopers have to stick out for each other." He could appreciate a good beatdown, so he stood back to let her finish up.

"You should've heard him earlier when he was talking about what he'd do to me! Fucking shitstain!" she snarled, rearing up with the bat again. The man whimpered. "You won't pull this shit again on anyone else, you hear?" He nodded fearfully. Slowly, carefully, she lowered the bat. "Get the hell out of here." The man scrambled out from under her, then past Joseph, and down the street. The girl paused for a moment, breathing heavily, still facing away from him.

"That was some nice work," he complimented her. "You from a baseball Loop?"

"No," she said, still panting a little, "I just keep bats around for stuff like this. Beating up on assholes."

He laughed heartily. "That's what I do all Loop! Hey, what's your name? I'm Joseph. Joseph Joestar."

She made an odd, strangled noise and froze for a moment before whirling around to stare at him, eyes wide. His smile slipped a little. "Is, uh, that a problem?" he asked carefully.

"You—you're real," she breathed out, and his concern returned slightly. "You're really…" She took a hesitant step forward, reaching out to touch him. Then she squealed—with delight? Her hands flew to her cheeks as the bat clattered to the ground, forgotten.

"Holy shit!" she exclaimed. "Son of a bitch!"

He snickered. "So you do know me."

"Know you?" she shouted. "You're JoJo! The JoJo, the best JoJo! Holy shit, I just—I should've figured, from the location, and the time, and all, I've read Battle Tendency like ten thousand times, and—holy shit, does that mean I'm replacing Smokey? And that means the whole Battle Tendency stuff is gonna happen, and—eeeeeeee!" Her rant devolved into excited squeeing. "Wait, oh my god, please, pleeeease let me come with you! Don't leave me behind like Smokey!"

He was still trying to sift through what she'd just said, and the petition caught him off guard. "Leave you behind?" Clearly she liked him, so—so he needed to play up his Joseph-ness, right? "I'm not sure," he said, suddenly affecting disinterest and looking away. "The Pillar Men are extremely dangerous. Are you an experienced Looper? If you're not, yet, you'd probably be safer staying here, taking in New York. It's a great city."

"W-what does that have to do with it? You can handle them just fine by now, right? You've been fighting them for a long time now, I could

come along and be fine!" Ah, so she *was* a new Looper.

"You never know with them," he said seriously. "Their powers are Loop Variable. All it would take is one stray attack and you'd be out for the Loop. No, no, better you stay here."

The horror mixed with fury on her face was hilarious. "No! No fucking way! I am not missing out on Mexico, and Rome, and Switzerland, and seeing the Aztec gods of fitness in person!" She blushed as she realized what she said, but pushed on. "I'll—I'll do anything to come along! I'll—I'll be your servant! For the rest of the Loops!"

"The rest of the Loops?" He repeated dubiously, his messing with her temporarily forgotten. "You can't be serious."

"Dead serious," she said quickly. "Dead fucking serious. I will do whatever you want me to do, literally forever."

He exhaled slowly, rubbing the back of his head. He hadn't meant to push her like this, and he definitely didn't want her as his servant. The jokes Caesar would make alone…

But it could be a sort of opportunity. Even if he could easily protect her from the Pillar Men in truth, they could be more dangerous than anticipated, and if she could "serve" him by training in Hamon she would be all the safer. And Lisa Lisa had been nagging him to take on some disciples, now that he was formally a Ripple Master.

"Well," he said finally, "let's see how you do. If you do everything I tell you—and I do mean everything—you can come along. But!" He raised a finger. "That includes some severe training. If you want to see the Pillar Men, that means you need to be able to defend yourself from them."

"Wait—so that means—" She squealed again. "Hamon! You're going to teach me to use Hamon?"

He nodded, and smirked ever so slightly. "If you can take it."

"If I can take it?" The fury came back into her voice. "Did you just see how I beat up that kid? I can take it."

Privately, Joseph agreed with her, but publicly he just shrugged. "Well, we'll see."

She actually stuck her tongue out at him, and he rolled his eyes.

30.10 – That One Time Early On Where Sayori Gets Addicted to Pachinko, by Awesomedude17.

Natsuki had noticed that there was a pachinko parlor now. Knowing Monika, it was probably an experiment to make the world they live in seem more real.

Still, it was worth taking a look.

Once inside, she saw Sayori, staring intently at the pachinko machine, dark bags under her eyes.

"So that's where you were for the past two days. Sayori, why are you here?"

"Just one more game and then I'll get back to ya, Nats."

Natsuki huffed and snapped her fingers rhythmically.

Monika appeared out of nowhere.

"Okay, what is…oh. Hold on." Monika checked Sayori's coding.

Addicted to gambling.

"Oh dear. I should've known better than to let in gambling here, but noooo~ I had to make it more real here. Give me a minute."

Many, many, many *Loops later:*

"–and that's why we don't allow gambling in our Branch." Monika explained.

"Oh. That long ago, huh. Heh. We were so young." Yuri said.

"I lost one million yen thanks to that. Kinda glad Monika butted in." Sayori scratched the back of her head with embarrassment.

30.11 – Mechanical Hearts: 3 rd 0ption, by Skaz Wolfman.

Several days passed before Monika saw Penny again. She didn't answer any of her calls. Monika was worried, of course, but she refrained from hacking the CCT to track her down, again. If Penny needed alone time, that was her prerogative. In the meantime, Monika had explained the entire situation to Sayori, and they had discussed it at length. Despite what she had told Raven about discretion, Monika didn't feel hypocritical about it. She wasn't merely *gossiping* to Sayori, after all, and she trusted Sayori to keep sensitive subjects in confidence. And if Monika was to be perfectly honest with herself, Sayori had a much better knack for empathizing with others than she did. The day that Monika and Sayori saw Penny again was the same day Sun returned to Vale, the day before the Dance.

"Hey Dokies," he greeted them jovially when they met him in Beacon's courtyard. "Were either of those Pings from anyone around here Waking Up?" he asked.

"One was me," Sayori spoke up, "but whoever else Pinged, they haven't checked in on the Loopers' Scrollnet chat."

"Penny's Awake," Monika chimed in, "but I don't think she ever sent out a Ping. I was with her when she Woke Up."

"Hey Sun, ya wanna go to the dance with me?" Sayori asked out of nowhere.

"Say what?!" Monika gawked.

"Sure," Sun replied casually.

"Yippee~! C'mon, Moni, we need to go dress shopping!" exclaimed Sayori, grabbing her by the hand.

"No, seriously, *what's happening* ?" Monika demanded as Sayori dragged her away.

Sayori didn't answer until they were out of earshot of their Faunus friend. "You've been worrying about Penny all week. We've hardly talked about anything else, and I bet you've been thinking about her constantly. Worrying about your friends is all well and good, but there's got to be a limit. Let's take the next forty-eight hours off from worrying about Penny and just enjoy ourselves. If she hasn't reached out to us by then, we'll hunt her down and make sure she's okay. Okay?" Sayori asked her. Her voice was serious and devoid of artificial bubbles.

"Alright, fine. Thirty-six hours," Monika haggled.

"I'll take it," Sayori quipped. After they had exited Beacon and Sayori was sure no one could see them, she Unpocketed a landspeeder, and she drove her and Monika into the city.

Along the way, Monika asked "But no, *seriously* , what the heck was that about?"

"What the heck was what about?" Sayori asked innocently.

"Don't give me that, Veeps. You asking Sun to the dance."

"Yeah, so?" Sayori non-answered with a shrug. "Dances are more fun with partners. Don't you agree? Wait, nevermind, stupid question."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Monika asked archly.

"Don't give me that, Prez. You *know* what that was supposed to mean," Sayori retorted. "In all seriousness, it was just one of my

famous whims. I'm not going to start dating Sun, if that's what's freaking you out."

"It's not, because I know you aren't, and it wouldn't even if you were. You just threw me a bit, there, was all," Monika assured her.

Monika and Sayori made it into the downtown area, where Sayori parked her landspeeder, and Pocketed it after they got out. "Experimental Atlas tech," Monika handwaved to the gawking onlookers.

"I don't get it, you're a cosplay hobbyist. You really don't have something in your Pocket to wear?" Monika asked as they entered a fashion boutique. "If you wanted to buy something new to wear, you should have done it *days* ago."

"Rotted Ash, quit being such a stick-in-the-Mudika," Sayori grumbled. "Shopping for dresses is fun. And yes, I *was* planning to go in one of my cosplays, but now I have a date which means I need something *nice* ."

"Seeing as it isn't really a serious thing, could you please not call it a *date* ?" Monika asked.

"But it is! It's a friendly date, that's what it is. What do you think?" she asked as she pulled a Mistralian number that resembled a Chinese *qipao* .

"I think it's four inches too long in the leg, you'll trip over yourself. More than you're already probable to," Monika replied.

"Okay, *now* you're being a grump. And on purpose, too. You know darn well I can shorten a hemline in my sleep." Sayori got in Monika's face and grabbed her cheeks, squishing them to punctuate her every word, "This. Is. Supposed. To. Be. FUN! Put the responsible Anchor looking out for other people thing on hold and just *be a damned girl with me for a few hours* !"

"Okay, okay, mercy! I give, I give!" yelped Monika.

"M-Monika, Sayori?!" gasped a familiar voice, the kind of deep and feminine voice that could make a person's spine tingle. Monika and Sayori froze, and looked to see a familiar face poking out from inside a circular clothes rack.

"Yuri?" asked Monika, "What are you doing…uh…"

"Are you and Natsuki playing hide-and-go-seek?" asked Sayori, looking around for any signs of gouge-my-eyes-out pink and listening for the wild call of the Tsundere.

At the mention of Natsuki's name, Yuri blushed furiously and hid behind a curtain of her own hair.

" *OHMYGOSH* did she ask you to the dance?!" Sayori gasped, diving into the rack to drag their Unawake friend out into the open.

"N-no, don't, please Sayori, I'm trying to esc–"

"There you are!" cried a voice as an impeccably dressed teenager strutted up to them, with a rabbit Faunus hovering around her elbow area. Team CFVY had returned from their mission early, or rather, on time, this loop. Apparently the endangered village's Grimm problem had been solved before they had even gotten there. Most probably the work of a monkey-tailed stranger that had passed through the area on his way to Anima…

"Ahhh," said Monika in tones of enlightenment. "I get it. Natsuki ambushed you with a proposal to go to the dance with her–though knowing her it was framed as a demand–and before you could stop being a nervous wreck long enough to call *us* for help, Coco happened along and whisked you off to go dress-shopping. Am I in the ballpark?"

"That's pretty much what happened," the rabbit Faunus, Velvet Scarlatina, confirmed. "I was the one who found Yuri in the middle of

a nervous breakdown, and she seemed so overwhelmed and helpless that I kind of called up Coco for help without thinking about it…"

Yuri shuffled awkwardly in place, fidgeting with her long, bushy, raccoon tail in her hands and staring down at the floor. "A-actually… technically…it was, eh, kind of…me."

"Huh?" asked Sayori. "You what?"

"I…kind of…accidentally, mind you…suggested to Natsuki that we go to the dance together," Yuri murmured, her face burning. "I didn't really *mean* it–I mean, I did!–just, I wasn't being entirely serious when I suggested it, you know…I thought she would laugh it off, but Natsuki…"

"Responded with too much enthusiasm and gusto for you to take it back?" Monika guessed. Yuri nodded, looking like she was going to cry.

"Alright, now that you're all up to speed, we've got work to do," Coco cut in, lowering her shades. "C'mon, Yuri, I've got twelve more dresses for you to try on."

" *Save meeeeee* ," Yuri hissed to her friends as Coco dragged her off toward the fitting rooms, though by Yuri's attitude you'd think her destination was the gallows.

"Is today 'teen drama' enough for you, yet?" Monika asked Sayori.

"Getting there," Sayori quipped back.

"Well, for better or worse, Yuri's in…very competent hands, at least," said Monika. "Reckon we should track down Nat and see if she needs help?"

"Natsuki will be fine," said Sayori as she turned back to a clothes rack. "She *made* her own dress days ago, and knowing her she'll

have no problem making it date-worthy in a day."

"Point," said Monika.

Eventually, the expanded shopping party of Sayori, Coco, Yuri, Monika, and Velvet moved on to another store. "This place is literally brand new, just had its grand opening three days ago," Coco remarked as they approached it. "I've been meaning to check this one out, but I've been so busy with planning the dance since we got back from our mission. Supposedly this place designs and produces all of their products in-house."

Monika hardly heard her, staring intently at the store's sign. *Polendina's Pageantry* , it read. She glanced at Sayori, who was giving the sign a thoughtful stare of her own. Monika took a deep breath, and stepped toward the door.

Immediately, Sayori had her wrist in a vice-grip and was steering her toward Yuri, Coco, and Velvet. "You promised me thirty-six hours, and it hasn't even been *two* yet. Let me field this one while you… make sure Coco doesn't drive Yuri into a nervous breakdown, I guess?"

Monika sighed, but she nodded. "Alright, VP. Do your thing," she relented, following the others to the dresses. Sayori closed her eyes and opened her Force Sense, seeking a familiar presence.

She found Penny in what she presumed was the break room, back in the 'Employees Only' part of the shop. No one noticed Sayori, not until Penny looked up from her magazine and saw her. "Heya Penny," Sayori greeted. "You hit a growth spurt lately?" she asked.

Penny raised an eyebrow, then looked down at her body, and then she laughed. "Yeah, it's easier to set up a business in the city when you look like a grown-up," she said. "What brings you here, Sayori?"

"Well, shopping for dresses for the dance at Beacon is what brought me to your shop, but what I'm doing *right here* is talking to you so

Monika doesn't. I strong-armed her into taking the weekend off from worrying about you," Sayori replied honestly.

"…would 100,000,000 Lien worth of in-store credit be enough to buy my way out of any awkward discussions?" Penny asked.

Sayori chuckled as she helped herself to a seat at Penny's table. "No need for bribery. We can talk about whatever you want, and we won't talk about anything you don't want. That being said, I have to say, and I hope you'll forgive the cliché, but…well, I sense great conflict within you, my friend."

Penny sighed and set her magazine aside. "Yeah, aint that the truth…can I assume that Monika's given you the details?"

"It's literally the only thing she's had on her mind since I Awakened," Sayori replied, "The only time we *haven't* spent talking about you was when non-Loopers were about." Penny winced, and Sayori added, "I'm not annoyed, of course. Maybe a smidge, but that whole entire smidge is directly squarely at Monika for spending so much time dwelling on *one* thing. Which I totally get, y'know, you're our friend and a fellow Synthetic, and you're going through relationship problems and an identity crisis, which are both things Monika super relates to. This whole situation almost feels *tailored* to hitting her buttons. Only thing missing is one of the Brothers actively screwing with you. Still, Monika's not at her best when she's completely fixated on one thing like this; she's at the top of her game when she's spinning balls and juggling plates."

"You mean spinning plates and juggling balls?" asked Penny.

"Exactly what I said, yeah," said Sayori, who started playing with a yoyo. "So, a dress shop."

"Yeah. I needed something non-Baseline to occupy myself with, and one of my A.S.P.E.C.T.s made this really cute dress…kind of put me in a mood," Penny explained.

"Hey, after the Dance, you mind if I come back to help out?" Sayori asked, "It'd be fun to flood Vale with my cosplays disguised as fashion."

"Sure thing," Penny replied with a smile. Then she sighed and asked, "So, addressing the Goliath in the room, do you have any insight on my problem?"

"Well…I do know how it feels to be divided between two conflicting dealies," said Sayori. She scooted her chair to her left and twisted it to the right, folding her arms and putting on such a pouty, grouchy expression that Penny snorted. "Monika's the worst!" Sayori suddenly snapped, her voice dripping with acid and making Penny flinch backward. "She's a horrible friend, and she hurts people just because she can and they *might* be in the way of her getting what she wants!"

Then Sayori got up, twisting the chair and herself the other way, and put on a guilty expression. "But…I mean, she didn't think she was hurting anyone real, and she felt trapped like a rat in a maze. She just wanted for someone to care about her."

The chair twisted again, and Sayori was angry again. "Who cares what she thought?! She still hurt people. She hurt *me* , took the sickness in my head and made it worse, made poor Yuri lose her mind completely, made my best friend a helpless witness to an acid trip from Hell! She's selfish and cruel!"

"But she feels so bad about all that!" Sadfaced Sayori countered. "Can't we give her a second chance?"

"Why should we?!" Madfaced Sayori spat back in her face. "She's probably just faking it because we're all stuck Looping together and she doesn't want us to treat her like the duplicitous piece of crap she is!"

"But!" Sadfaced Sayori gasped, "Jenny said we're all Looping because Monika *cares* about us. She brought us back in the end,

because she felt bad about what she did."

"Just because she grew a *rudimentary conscience* at the very last second doesn't change the horrible things she did," Madfaced Sayori sneered.

And back and forth like that Sayori went with herself, for almost half an hour, before abruptly straightening her chair to face Penny. Her expression reverted to its natural, small, affectionate smile. "Get the picture?"

Penny nodded. She wasn't sure whether to laugh at the spectacle she had just witnessed, or offer Sayori a hug. "So, what broke the conflict? What made you compromise?"

"I didn't compromise, Penny," Sayori gently corrected her. "Compromising means giving up something to get something. I didn't give up anything. I simply chose to forgive. To be better. To end the cycle of hurt. I can condemn the things Monika did, but that doesn't mean I have to condemn *her* . Ultimately, she's as much a victim of our twisted game and her own schemes as the rest of us. In the end, she got her karmic punishment. Betrayed and consigned to oblivion by the one she loved, the one for whom she did the horrible things she did."

Penny frowned. "I do recall that she once told me that she didn't *really* love the Player. They were just a means of being acknowledged as 'Real'."

"So she claims. And who knows, maybe she actually believes it?" Sayori shrugged, "But she doesn't just avoid romance because of guilt or fear of a relapse. She's afraid *to* love another, to trust and express vulnerability to someone else. Regardless of how she really felt about the Player, their decision to rebuke her affections and subject her to the same fate as her victims clearly cut her deeply."

"Hmm. So, you adopted the same 'obligated to fight evil but not to hate it' philosophy Ruby has, I suppose?" Penny sighed. "I mean,

you *are* a Sith, so I guess it makes sense."

"Oh, no, I totally hate evil," Sayori corrected her. "I just don't, as a rule, hate *people* . People that do evil things aren't evil, though."

Penny tilted her head. "What?"

Sayori stopped smiling, completely. "I don't think there's any such thing as 'good people' and 'bad people'. People are messy and complicated. A single sapient mind, no matter how outwardly simple and shallow the person's behavior might be, is a self-contained microcosm of infinite depth and vibrancy. Even when it's all on its own, the mind ravenously consumes sensory input and processes it into cogitation. And that's a mind *on its own* . Put two minds together, and their mutual complexity, compounded by the most subtle and profound of differentiations, becomes exponentially greater. Each additional sapient mind added to the mix–each *individual* sapient mind added to the mix–will *multiply* this complexity by another order of magnitude. We think of each other in simplistic terms like 'nice person' or 'grumpy person' for the same reason a mortal person can't comprehend the true form of an eldritch god; because trying to process the full scope of a person's individuality *if you could even access that much information* would break your mind. And in this regard, a Looper isn't that much different from a mortal. Same for Synthetics and Organics. Changing a Synthetic's neural hardware is enough to make that Synthetic unrecognizable *to itself* , so any two sapient Synthetics are just as inadequately equipped to truly *know* each other as any two sapient Organics."

Sayori took a deep breath. "All that to say: people are complicated. So-called 'simple' people are only seen as such because they don't know how to properly express their complexity, or because the people around them don't know how to recognize it. The same can be said of so-called 'good' and 'bad' people. You only see good people because you don't recognize their badness, and you only see bad people because you don't recognize their goodness. A person can spend their whole life doing bad things, but as long as they're a person they can choose to do differently at any time. Anyone who's

truly, purely good or evil all the way through *isn't really a person* . And even the tiniest spark of goodness can be nurtured and encouraged to grow, until it outshines the evil in a person. Hating a person–and I say this from experience–means refusing to acknowledge their capacity to grow and change. Refusing to acknowledge that fundamental ability means not acknowledging them as a person. And, speaking again from experience, there's nothing crueler that one person can do to another than to not acknowledge their personhood. Wanting to be acknowledged is the most basic desire that separates sapient beings from everything else. It was that desire that drove Monika insane."

"…that was a lot of words," Penny observed. "Lots of big words. Very unlike you…or, rather, I suppose it's just a side of you I haven't recognized until now, isn't it?"

"I'm in Serious Mode, right now, yeah," said Sayori. "Until you resolve this internal dilemma, you're at risk of suffering a similar mental split as Cinder did. At times like this, I have to put aside my comforting disguise as a care-free, daydreamy kind of girl."

Penny opened her mouth to protest the thought that she could repeat Cinder's Fall…but the memories of her A.S.P.E.C.T.s fighting Monika burned in her mind. She closed her mouth, an intangible coldness gripping her neural network. Cinder had split her mind in half between two personae: The Sister and The Destroyer. Was she herself similarly at risk of splitting in half, in a more uncontrolled way? Into The Friend and The Fanatic?

"If I were you, I'd just make a hobby out of stonewalling Cinder, Roman, Neo, and Raven every time they go too far. Just make sure *you* don't go too far in the process," said Sayori.

"But I can't try to 'fix' them, because that just begs a repeat of Cinder's Fall," Penny lamented, "So all I can do is combat them, forever, and only in the loops where I'm Awake."

Sayori shrugged. "Better than nothing, isn't it? Better than stewing in your issues and doing *nothing* , or even worse doing something self-destructive. And it won't be forever. The Loops have to end someday. And when they do, if Cinder, Roman, Neo, and Raven really do become Dark Gods…well, then you can be their Holy Nemesis, if you're still heck-bent on 'saving the world', you know?"

"…I just don't want to become the most divisive element in my family," Penny admitted. "Everyone else seems *just fine* with letting them 'be themselves.' Every time I try to point out the problem, it feels like I'm rocking the boat."

"Either become a divisive element now, or wait until you become the next Branch-shaking catastrophe," Sayori bluntly stated. She brought her smile back. "Every family has drama and friction, Penny. There's chaos, and then there's strife. Chaos is neither good nor bad, it's just *change* . Strife, on the other hand, is almost invariably bad because it sets everyone at each other's throats. Among the cardinal virtues of Remnant's culture are individuality and self-expression, after all, so…just express yourself, Penny. As long as you make it clear to everyone that this is something you need to do, the same way Cinder needs to do what she does, they'll understand. They'll still love you, and they'll adapt for you. That's what family does. Everyone else is fine with Cinder being Cinder because they adapted to her. Pyrrha adapted to her like you adapted to Pyrrha. It's all a never-ending cycle, you see?"

Penny sighed. Then she sighed again, more loudly. Then she groaned and laid her head down on the table. "I don't like it, but you're right. The best answer to my problem is the hard one."

"Few things worth doing are easy," Sayori commiserated. "I felt the same way when I realized I needed to choose to forgive Monika, or ask to be made a Travelling Looper and leave my friends behind. One was hard, but the other was impossible. The *easy* thing to do would have been to ignore the problem, but then I'd still be miserable."

"Wow! You actually considered asking to be a Travelling Looper?" Penny asked, "I never would have guessed."

"Pinkie said it was an option, and I did *seriously* consider it…but it would have meant leaving Yuri and Natsuki with Monika, and I couldn't do that to them. Now, Monika's like a sister to me, and I'm almost ashamed that I was ever so blinded by my own pain as to not recognize hers." Sayori took a deep breath, and forced her smile to brighten. "Anyways, what's past is past. Gotta keep moving forward. Speaking of moving forward and me not being good at segues, you coming to the Dance?"

Penny sighed. "I don't know. Generuncle Jamie isn't Awake so I'm not sure I'll be able to get out of it, but…I don't know."

"Well, maybe Sun and I could ditch the Dance to do something fun and distracting with you, instead?" Sayori offered. "Dances are fun and all, but there's no reason for you to go if you're not going to enjoy yourself."

"Maybe…wait, you and Sun?" Penny asked with a risen brow.

"Yeah, I asked him to be my partner for the Dance. It's nothing serious," Sayori explained.

Penny narrowed her eyes, and made a show of looking around before leaning in and whispering, "Can you keep a secret?"

"One of my better skills, believe it or not. Whatcha got?" Sayori whispered back, leaning in as well.

"You didn't hear this from me, got it? And if she finds out you know, Monika will *know* you heard it from me, so be very careful how you use this intel," Penny added in a very serious tone.

"Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye," Sayori replied with the utmost gravitas.

" *Monika thinks Sun is hot,* " Penny hiss-pered, her volume so low that Sayori almost didn't hear it.

"You don't say?" Sayori asked with a truly wicked grin as she Unpocketed a pocketbook and jotted down a note in it. "I should have guessed; she's kind of got a thing for Lovable Idiots. Dunno if she finds them endearing or if she just likes being the intellectual superior…probably a little of both, though she'd never cop to the second one. So, whataya say the three of us invite Monika to ditch the Dance with us? Then you and I can try to make something happen. Your mileage may vary, but personally I find that focusing on other people's problems is the best way to forget about my own."

"I think that sounds positively devious…I'm in!" Penny agreed, her eyes lighting up with a new sense of energy.

"Ms. Polendina!" squeaked a young man, a mouse-eared Faunus, that stumbled into the room. "Two customers were arguing, I think they're students from Beacon, *and I think they're gonna start shooting each other* !"

…

"This isn't the first time you've started a gunfight after I've dragged you out to do something," Sayori observed in a very sour tone. She sat on a cot, glaring at Monika.

"Maybe you'll learn to stop dragging me out places," Monika rejoined, tossing a ball into the air and catching it. She was laying down on a cot on the opposite side of the jail cell she was sharing with Sayori.

"Thirty-six hours, Moni. You couldn't give me *thirty-six hours* , could you?"

"You asked for thirty-six hours of not worrying about Penny. It's been almost ten hours, and I've hardly thought about her at all," Monika replied.

"We're going to miss the Dance," Sayori grumbled.

"No, we won't," said Monika, "Penny's not pressing charges, so we'll got off with a slap on the wrist for disturbing the peace. We–or should I say I–have more than enough lien to pay the fine in the morning."

"I would imagine that 'disturbing the peace' is a much more serious charge in a world where the Creatures of Grimm exist than it usually is. And since you've got lien to spare why haven't you paid our bail?!" Sayori demanded.

"Oh, come off it, Sayo. We *did* break the law, so it's only fair that we suffer a little for it," Monika calmly explained, still playing catch with herself. "If you were better about managing your money, you could have paid your own bail."

"You know I'm not good with money!"

"I'll say! You're the only perpetually short-changed Looper I know."

"Y'know what? If Coco ever starts Looping, I'm telling her all about this," Sayori declared, "And I'll help her figure out a way to get you back."

"Good luck with that, VP."

Compiler's Commentary:

30.1: I titled this snip when the only thing I had for it in terms of plot was "Yuri and Natsuki loop in as Yumie and Heinkel." By the time I finished writing it, I felt like the title no longer adequately described what was going on…but heck it, I take pride in my dumb puns!

30.2: Yuri's finna do some Shadowrunning.

30.3: Picture perfect nonsense.

30.4: I'm not going to lie, I very much enjoy showing off Monika's darker side.

30.5: Friends fight over the craziest stuff…

30.6: …but then they hold interventions for you because they care about your wellbeing.

30.7: FIGHT SCENE! PSYCHOLOGICAL DISCUSSION! *CHARACTER EXPLORATION!*

30.8: Poor Monika had to heroically suppress the urge to make a joke about buttresses.

30.9: Something I wanted to write ages ago but never found the time to (partly because I still needed to watch Battle Tendency, which I have only recently found the time to do), and kind-hearted Tetra was willing to write it on my behalf. And that's why he's my favorite coin. Snaps for Tetra! *snaps fingers*

30.10: Slot machines have potent hypnotic properties, true facts.

30.11: Sayori's such a good, hard-working friend. Everyone send cookies to the best cinnamon bun!

Chapter 31

31.1 – The Dark, Sacred Night, by Skaz Wolfman.

Rip Van Winkle stared up expectantly at the night sky, musket in hand. To hunt the most dangerous monster on the face of the Earth was the greatest glory, and she couldn't wait for her prey to arrive. She waited in silence, save for the waves crashing against the sides of the ship she was on. Then a shrieking ' *caw* ' pierced the night, followed by a chorus of responses in the same avian tongue. Van Winkle looked in the direction of the outcry, and heard the sound of many flapping wings approaching from the north…and the south, east, and west as well. She watched as a crow glided into view, before it perched on one of the guardrails. It was joined by another, and another, and another…

Van Winkle soon found herself surrounded on all sides by a murder of crows numbering in the low hundreds, at least. She clutched her musket tightly, and smiled. "I must admit, this vas not the entrance I vas expecting, Herr Alucard."

The murder erupted in a cacophony of cawing, and in the midst of the cawing something approximating a woman's voice rasped, " *My apologies if I have disappointed you, Fraulein Van Winkle.* "

Then the crows melted into shadows, swirling like a cyclone around her and blurring into one great mass, which bunched up and slowed down until the whole great shadow was crouched in front of her. Then it shrunk and resolved into the form of a giant crow…no, just a person wearing a cloak of crow feathers and a plague doctor mask. The figure doffed their hat and gave her a sweeping bow. "Well met by moonlight, Fraulein," said a husky, feminine voice from behind the mask.

Rip Van Winkle only narrowed her eyes, and growled, "You are not Alucard. Are you the pet policewoman he's taken?"

"You cut me to the quick, Fraulein," the masked woman replied as she replaced her hat. "Allow me to return the favor." Her body flickered, and suddenly she had a blade out. At the same time, blood gushed out from a gash on Van Winkle's left upper arm.

She didn't grab the injured limb and hiss or cry out in pain. Instead, her eyes widened and she gasped, "Such incredible speed!" She smiled, and adjusted her glasses. "Perhaps you're worthy prey after all! *Vunderbar* !"

The masked crow woman chuckled. "My dear Fraulein…there are the hunted, and there are hunters…and then there are the Hunters of Hunters. I see I must disabuse you of your skewed perception of your role in this moonlit fantasy. *The Third Eye has seen you, Rip Van Winkle, and a Hunter of Hunters has come* ."

The second Blade of Mercy appeared in Yuri's hand, and she launched herself at Rip Van Winkle. Without so much as shifting her posture, the would-be huntress blocked Yuri's strikes by twirling her musket around her body, before sending her flying back by slamming the butt in her chest. Then she flipped the musket around, and fired. An enchanted bullet, glowing with purple light, punched through Yuri's chest. Yuri threw her head back and gasped. The bullet arced back around and went through her again, and again and again and again, tearing her body to pieces where she stood, until she collapsed in a twitching heap.

Rip Van Winkle stamped the butt of her musket on the ship deck. "Tut, tut. Vhat a letdown. You are clearly vun bitch who's bark is vorse than her bite, *ja* ?" she asked with a shit-eating grin.

Then her smile faltered when the corpse she had just made *moaned* . It wasn't a moan of the dying, or even a moan of pain. The moaning pitched higher as the dead woman arched what was left of her back, slowly raising up to her feet in an unnatural manner, as if being lifted by strings. She slumped forward, her mask falling away in pieces, revealing a woman with amethyst eyes and lavender locks. Also, missing half of her face, though it was quickly regenerating. "Such

exquisite sensation," she said breathlessly, with a huge, manic smile. "My true love will always be the blade…but I'll admit to finding myself enamored with *that* cannon, at least. When I pry it from your dying hands, beast, take solace that it shall occupy a special place of honor in my collection of trophies."

A bead of sweat rolled down Van Winkle's face, but she rallied herself. "You are most presumptuous! Your victory is far from assured," she said before firing another shot.

Yuri *exploded* into a murder of crows, flying away in every direction. The magic bullet pierced one, and wheezed around piercing more, drawing bright violet lines against the inky canvas of the night.

One crow looped around and glided silently before landing behind Van Winkle, who didn't notice it until it swelled up and loomed over her. The crow opened its beck, and Yuri's head grew out of the end of its tongue. "There is so much more to a good hunt than just victory…but I wouldn't expect a beast to understand that," she said with a leering grin.

Van Winkle swung her musket around, thrusting the end of her musket against the massive crow's neck. "Checkmate!" she cried as she pulled the trigger, decapitating the monstrous bird.

"Indeed it is," Yuri's head agreed as her arms emerged from the crow's chest, the Blades of Mercy in hand. With two vertical swings in tandem, Rip Van Winkle was neatly…disarmed.

The crows all melted into shadows and streamed back together, reforming into Yuri's human, Crowfeather-attired form. As promised she wrenched the musket from Van Winkle's hands, which still clung to the weapon, and deposited it in her Pocket. Then she used one of her Blades to stake Van Winkle to the deck, through her midsection. Throughout this, the bespectacled woman seemed numb with shock. "This…no…this vas not…it vas not supposed to be this vay…how…" she muttered.

Yuri sighed. "Well, you fought about as well as I expected, unfortunately. But as I said, there's more to a good hunt than just victory. A good hunt is about ceremony. And for one of my covenant, the best ceremony for ending a hunt is something called a 'sky burial'. Allow me to educate you, my dear Fraulein," said Yuri. She once again exploded into a murder of crows that took to the air…and then the crows descended, and Rip Van Winkle screamed.

…

In the body of a crow, Yuri glided over the burning streets of London. Iscariot's paladins, Millennium's pseudo-vampires, and Alucard's innumerable host of Familiars tore each other to pieces en masse. Yuri couldn't help but marvel at the unfathomable depths of Seras Victoria's power; in the course of just a day, she had cast her Shadow over the entire metropolis, compelling every single human being to pick up and evacuate the city. "Master gets restless pretty easily, so it's good for his morale to let him have his Baseline bloodbath once in a while. Don't mean innocent folk gotta get buggered in the process, though," Seras had explained to her when she had been surprised by their decision *not* to preempt Millennium. *'Anchors are simple amazing,'* Yuri concluded.

Yuri spotted her next target, and went into a dive. Transforming back into her humanoid form, Yuri landed in the street, right in his path. Her clothes melted into shadows and reformed into a much classier-looking attire. Of all the Hunters she had met in Yharnam, two had made a special impact on her. The first was Eileen the Crow, who had inspired Yuri to walk the path of hunting *all* monsters, even those hiding in human forms. The second was a rare breed; a warrior who had matched Yuri's skill with a blade, despite not being a Looper. Yuri had, of course, taken her weapon afterwards, but despite it being perhaps her favorite of all the blades she had collected in the Loops, Yuri had sworn only to unsheathe it against truly worthy opponents. Such was the respect she had for Lady Maria of the Astral Clocktower.

Wearing also Lady Maria's Attire, Yuri drew one of the sabers that made up Rakuyo, and pointed it at her new target. "The Paleblood Moon is shining down on you, Father Alexander Anderson," she announced, "And a Hunter of Hunters stands in your path." In the distance, because the universe never misses a cue for moments like this, a bell tolled.

The paladin scoffed. "Outta my way, little girl. I've got a much bigger fish to fry."

"In the Hunt, there is no place for those who would meekly stand aside," Yuri replied, drawing the second saber and attaching it to the first. Then she sprang into action, bolting toward Anderson. Then instant she moved, he was already volleying bayonets at her. Moonlight, firelight, and sparks all flashed off of Rakuyo's blades as Yuri carved through the air and parried the flying blades.

Anderson was very agile, for a man of his bulk, which he handily demonstrated when Yuri got into melee range. She went for a low thrust, but he pinned her blade between two bayonets and yanked her to the side while stepping around behind her. She spun around with a wide slash, which Anderson blocked with one bayonet while swinging another down upon her in a manner befitting one that some called St. Guillotine.

With one, clean cut, he cleaved off one of Yuri's arms. As Yuri jumped to the side, the arm melted into a handful of crows that started flying around the Iscariot Paladin, pecking and scratching at his head and cawing in his ears. While they distracted her foe, Yuri regenerated her arm and took a running leap at a nearby building, kicking off of it to propel herself high into the air. Directly over Anderson. She fell upon him with a downward slash, but he caught the saber blade with his hand and drove a bayonet straight toward her heart. Yuri grabbed his wrist and lurched forward, redirecting the blade into her gut. At the same time, she pulled Rakuyo's dagger free from the saber and took a stab at Anderson's neck. She knicked him, but he pushed her saber back and jumped back from her. Yuri

landed on her feet, rejoining Rakuyo before yanking Anderson's bayonet out of her gut.

With a gleeful smile, Yuri plunged her hand *into* her stomach wound, and smeared her blood up and down Rakuyo's long blade as the wound closed over. Anderson growled and flung a wave of bayonets at her, but Yuri lashed out with her free hand, long tentacles bursting out and swiping the bayonets out of the air. She drew the hand back and thrust it at Anderson, the tentacles reemerging to fly at him, but he hacked and diced them to pieces with two bayonets in each hand. *'He really does have bayonets for days, doesn't he?'* Yuri thought.

Yuri disconnected Rakuyo's saber and dagger and charged at Anderson, using the dagger to parry his bayonets while slashing with the saber. She darted in, crossed blades with him, and then darted back away just as quickly. Using the Art of Quickening, she became a ghostly blur before darting in from his flank. He blocked her without missing a beat, and she immediately disengaged before Quickening again and attacking from another angle. She picked up speed and chose attack vectors seemingly at random, and never aimed for the same body part twice in a row…except for when she did, hoping to throw him off. His defense wasn't perfect, she got a fair few hits in, but his defense was stronger than a normal human opponent should have been able to muster.

' *Father Alexander Anderson is the Iscariots' spearhead,'* Yuri reminded herself. *'The pinnacle of their human augmentation sciences. His strength, speed, stamina, reflexes, and his sheer hunter's intuition and cunning, all brought to highest extremes that this world's humans are capable of. He'd have gone far in Yharnam; Father Gascoigne and Henryk have nothing on this man. Even Eileen and Yurie would have a hard time of it with him…'*

' *But he's no Gehrman,'* she thought with a grim smile. She rushed him again, spinning around as she recombined Rakuyo, and sweeping Anderson's bayonets aside with a one-handed swing. Then she drew the Evelyn from inside her coat, cocking it sideways

as she shoved it against his chest and pulled the trigger. Anderson's blood splattered all over her as he staggered backward.

He only chuckled as he filled his hands with bayonets. "Not bad, little girl, but not nearly good enough," he growled. He spread his arms and coiled his legs, taking a flying leap at her.

Yuri waited until the last second to Quicken behind him, slamming into him from behind and grabbing him by the back of his head. "You and I have a few things in common, and many, many differences, Father Anderson. But the biggest difference between us is that you fight for God. And I have *slain* gods. Here, let me show you," she whispered in his ear as a soft white glow shined from her eyes. Anderson's eyes widened and his whole body went stiff with paralysis as incomprehensible *things* steamrolled through his mind. "You're a great hunter, Father Anderson, but you can scarcely imagine the nightmares I have laid to rest."

"What…how…NO!" he screamed. Blood exploded from his ears, eyes, mouth and nose as Yuri's psychic Frenzy attack overwhelmed him. She let him go, and he staggered forward. Immediately, he whirled back around and swung at her with his blades. She Quickened straight back, opening a few meters between them.

"Your hunting instinct is admirable," she complimented. "But you've hit your limit. If I don't stop you, you're going to throw away your humanity tonight; what's worse is that it still won't bring you victory. Please, accept the kinder death that I offer you, and let yourself be freed from the night."

"I don't know how you know what I was planning, monster, but you're a fine one to talk about me 'throwing away my humanity'. NO SACRIFICE IS TOO GREAT, FOR AN ISCARIOT PALADIN TO RID THE WORLD OF SINFUL BEASTS LIKE YOU!" Anderson roared.

"Unlike some monsters I can name, I didn't throw away my humanity in becoming a vampire. Rather, I embraced myself," Yuri retorted as she split Rakuyo again. She grabbed the long blade, and dragged it

across her hand. The wound sealed immediately, while the blood seemed to expand to coat the blade. "You know, I'll confess, I've actually never *tried* using a Bloodtinge weapon as a vampire. I'm very curious how my altered blood will affect it."

She swung at Anderson, despite the distance between them, and the blood on her blade glowed brightly and flew off at him. He leapt into the air to dodge, but the wave of blood broke up and *followed him* , in the form of white-hot glowing spikes. Anderson couldn't evade them in midair, and even he could deflect them all, as fast and numerous as they were. A few got past his guard and embedded themselves in his flesh. His clothes caught fire from the heat, and *then* the blood spikes *exploded* , engulfing him in flames.

Howling in pain and fury, Anderson hit the ground in a crouch, and threw himself at Yuri once more. As he charged her, still wreathed in flames, his hand darted into his coat and pulled out a long wooden box…

Yuri Quickened over to his side and loped his arm off.

So Anderson grabbed the arm and spun around, backhanding her with the dismembered limb. Then he grabbed the box, again, and crushed it in his hand. Yuri grit her teeth and charged him again, but then she Quickened backward to avoid a diagonal slash from one of Anderson's little disciples, Yumie. Shadowy wings flared out of her back and curled forward to shield her from a volley of gunfire from Yumie's partner, Heinkel.

"Damn it…VALENTINES!" Yuri called out. Her wings swept back and swelled, rounding out and splitting off from her body. They fell to the ground, bubbled and swelled up some more, and reformed into the brothers Luke and Jan Valentine. "Keep the children off my back," she ordered. The Familiars smiled hideously and nodded before drawing their weapons and breaking away to engage Yumie and Heinkal. While the sounds of gunfire and steel striking steel filled the air, Yuri pulled out a Fire Paper and used it to ignite her blades.

For, as soon as Yumie had forced Yuri back, Anderson had driven Helena's Nail into his chest, and the ensuing transformation was now almost over. Plant-like growths replaced his lost arm and covered his burned skin, and thorny vines sprouted from all over his body, lashing around like hungry snakes.

Yuri cast Witch Time, causing the flow of time outside of her to move at only a fraction of normal, and then she rushed forward. Such was the power of Helena's Nail that even with time slowed to a crawl, Anderson's vines still moved fast enough that Yuri still had to move to dodge them. The vines that got close enough, she slashed out at, setting the monster's extremities ablaze. The closer she got to the monster's main body, the harder it was to dodge. The burning blades of Rakuyo were fiery blurs arcing around her body. Even so, as the distance closed and the spell began to wear off, thorns started to graze her. Tongues of holy white fire licked across her clothes. So, naturally, Yuri sprouted a few shadow-arms and started tearing off her Hunter's Attire.

When she was finally close enough, Yuri swung Rakuyo's longblade through the monster's neck, and with the same motion she thrust Rakuyo's dagger into the monster's heart, between the ribs. Witch Time ended, and Yuri soon found her arms and legs bound in vines, and her body awash in holy flames. It was in this moment that Yuri of the "Doki Doki" Literature Club encountered something new. Something she had never experienced before, in her millions of loops.

A pain that did not feel good.

It was such an unpleasant shock that she screamed. She tried to swing at the monster, knowing she had to cut its heart out to end it, but the vines pulled her arms back. So she opened her mouth wide, a shadow-limb shooting out and snaking through the air before plunging down through the monster's throat hole. Thus did Yuri wrench Anderson's pierced heart free from the monster that had taken his place, and cast it into the sky. The vines fell away, and Yuri Unpocketed the Evelynn. "One should die proudly, when it is no

longer possible to live proudly. Friedrich Nietzsche," she quoted as she aimed the pistol skyward, before pulling the trigger. Anderson's heart exploded in midair, and Helena's Nail shattered as well.

"Father Anderson!" yelled Heinkel as she leveled her guns at Yuri. She and Yumie had dispatched the Valentines, and now they glared deathrays at her.

"It is right and proper for you to mourn your mentor," Yuri told them as she held a Yharnam blood vial over her head and shattered it. The blood spilled down over her, soaked into her vampiric skin, and sped up her regeneration. The burns left behind by the holy fire were slow to heal. "But he made a monster of himself. It is the providence of human beings to slay monsters, not for monsters to slay monsters."

"Then what is your excuse, monster of Hellsing?" demanded Yumie as she stepped closer, blade in hand.

"I'm not a monster, any more than I ever was a human, and I don't slay monsters because it is my providence to do so. I slay monsters because it is my *pleasure* to do so. Neither of you are monsters, so I am content to live and let live if you'll turn away from this dead end. I offered Anderson the same kindness, but he would not turn away from the doom he chose for himself."

"Shut up, you pretentious bitch!" Heinkel seethed before opening fire on her.

Yuri blurred forward, between them. She spun around, swinging the Rakuyo saber through Heinkel's midsection from behind. With the same motion, she plunged the Rakuyo dagger into Yumie's throat, even as the Iscariot nun made to run her through. She aimed true for Yuri's heart, but Yuri skewed her thrust by raising her knee to bump the blade upward, and at the same time she leaned her upper body down and forward. So instead of piercing her heart, Yumie's blade barely nicked Yuri's hair as it cut through the air. Yuri whirled herself

in front of Yumie, raising her saber, and yanked her dagger free before bringing the saber down to bisect Yumie from shoulder to hip.

As the Iscariot warriors gasped and bled out on the ground, Yuri cleaned her blades and said, "Die at peace, my enemies. I won't imbibe your souls. Enjoy your eternal rest."

Then she regenerated her damaged clothing, sheathed her weapons, and walked away.

…

She found him after the battle. The sun had risen, Iscariot had withdrawn, and Millennium had been thoroughly crushed under the Hellsing Organization's heels. She found him in a park, sitting on a bench, watching the sunrise.

"Well, it's about time we met," Yuri greeted him with a small smile, sitting next to him.

The armored man, who so closely resembled Alucard, returned her smile, and replied in his accented voice, "Indeed. It is not so often I shed my layers to experience the world so directly."

"Will you…um, stay this way?" Yuri asked him tentatively, "for a little while, at least? I've wanted to talk to you for a long time, but…"

"You were unsure how to ask," Dracula surmised. "I will linger, briefly, before I draw myself back together. What would you like to discuss, my child?"

Yuri blushed, much to her own surprise. "Oh…well, I'm not sure where to start…how briefly?"

Her eyes widened as she saw something *dark* flicker in his eyes. "Dragons are mighty, but terrible," he told her gravely. "It is good that they slumber long, and emerge rarely and fleetingly. There is a good reason, I think, that the Powers That Be chose my little fledgling

Seras to be the keystone of our reality, and not I. Do not let the recurring ages jade you to the priceless value of every moment, my child. I shall linger just a little while longer. Use this time wisely."

"Y-yes, Sire," Yuri conceded. "I guess the biggest thing is that I was wondering…sometimes, it's hard to discuss certain things seriously with Alucard. Even when he's being serious, he gives off this sense of…you know…" Yuri trailed away, and took a deep breath. "I've never had anyone like Alucard in my life, before. Literally, he's the closest thing I've ever had to a…to a…um…"

"Father figure?" Dracula guessed. Yuri nodded quickly, and scowled at the realization that her face was getting warmer. Then she heard the Wallachian prince next to her chuckle, and felt his hand on her shoulder. "Expressing your feelings to others does not come easily to you, I have noticed. Do you want to know how it is we feel about you, Yuri?" he asked.

"Yes, Sire," she answered in a small voice, forcing herself to look at him. Without trying, his presence loomed over her and made her feel like a little girl. Even with his presently relaxed expression, his eyes burned with something Yuri couldn't quit put a name to. It wasn't power, or madness, but it had something in common with both. It filled her with awe, and just a touch of fear. They were the eyes of a man who was, in his spirit, truly a king, even while he was someone else's slave. *'Majesty,'* she realized, *'That's what it is. He holds no tangible power over me, but even so, if he gave me a command I would be all too eager to carry it out. I would fight and kill for him, not to please myself but to earn his praise.'* The feeling was similar in its texture to the madness that had gripped her in Baseline, when she had confessed to the player character, though without any shades of romance, and her mind felt quite whole and sound.

"How I feel…" Dracula said slowly, thoughtfully. His smile grew by a small fraction. "I am glad that I decided to grant your wish. You are a good fledgling, Yuri. I am proud of the growth I have seen in you in the loops we have shared. Each new loop we share, I am excited to see how much more you have grown. That is how I feel about you,

my child." Then, he took his hand off her shoulder and turned back to the sunrise.

Yuri stared at him, flabbergasted, until she realized a tear was rolling down her cheek. Then she looked away and frantically dabbed at her eyes.

"The time draws close for this dragon to slumber again," said Dracula. "Was there anything else?"

"Nothing I can't discuss with Alucard," Yuri replied, "I just want to say thank you. Thank you, for your gift, and for being someone I can talk to. Thank you for everything, Si–…m-may I call you…F-Father?"

Dracula made an amused sound in his throat. "A vampire does what pleases them, as it pleases me to call you my child. So if it pleases you to call me such, then by all means."

"Then thank you, for everything you have done for me, Father," said Yuri. And as she said it, she felt a strange, new form of happiness well up in her heart. She felt her eyes water again, and ducked her head so he wouldn't see her cry.

Then she heard Alucard's voice say, "We'll also answer to 'Daddy Vladdy'."

Yuri was still so happy, she couldn't even be mad. She just threw her head back and laughed, high and clear and carrying.

31.2 – An Awkward Half-Conversation, by Masterweaver.

Monika looked up from her current project, which involved sporks and a particle accelerator, to see Natsuki's trademark huffyblush. The arms crossed like a slammed gate, the frowning half-pout, the puffed-up pink cheeks, the brows that wanted to look angry but just looked exasperated, and the eyes that glimmered with untold threat if she wasn't taken seriously.

"...'nedafvor..."

"Oh?" Monika asked politely.

"...s'boutm'cde..."

She leaned back, quirking an eyebrow. "Really? That's surprising."

Natsuki let a quiet huffing snort escape her nostrils, her glower solidifying slightly.

"I didn't mean anything by it," Monika assured her quickly. "Just, out of all of us, I wouldn't have expected you to want code alterations."

"Mnngh."

"Especially since you've gotten incredibly good at coding yourself, all things considered-"

"S'boutsx."

Monika blinked. "...oh. Ah..." She cleared her throat. "Okay, what... exactly do you need?"

Natsuki didn't meet her eyes. "...drnce..."

"Oh. Oh!" She managed a small chuckle. "I guess Yuri would be one to come on strong, huh?"

"...s'nt'tht..."

"Okay, so... what is it?"

"...s'jst...ntfr. T'hr."

"What's not fair?"

The pink crawled across Natsuki's face, developing into a beeper red in certain places. "...s'jst...she... she can do that to me, and I-I can't, I

can't show her how much I like it cause I wind up, uh, wound out. And... maybe if I could, she wouldn't, you know, uh..." She gestured vaguely at her forearm. "...wouldn't need to, as much..."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaah." Monika nodded. "Alright. We can... go over the details together."

"Thnk'u..."

"And of course we don't need to tell anybody about this."

"...prcate't..."

31.3 – Oh God, Not This Ag-, by Awesomedude17

(DDLC)/(Fate/Extra)

"So, weird variant where it's Christmastime. Not that bad." Natsuki said with a Santa cap snugly fitted on her head.

"Yeah. Definitely gave me an excuse to try out a new mocha recipe I picked up." Monika replied.

"How is it?"

"Eh. Too much dark chocolate. Might add a little less next time."

"I like it. The bitterness just... appeals to me." Yuri said.

"That's fine. So where's Sa-"

"Girls! Situation!" Sayori burst through the door.

"Wha... What is it?" Monika stood at attention.

"Something's coming!"

"What is it?"

" *HASHIRE SORI YO~* "

"What was that?" Yuri asked.

" *KAZE NO YOU NI~* "

"Oh no..." Monika said under her breath.

" *TSUKIMIHARA WO~* "

"Get away fr-"

" *PADORU~ PADORU~* " Shouted Nero Claudius, wearing a Santa suit while dragging a white sack behind her.

Needless to say, it was Padoru time.

31.4 – Sizing Up, by Awesomedude17.

"Yuri wasn't that tall and Natsuki wasn't that short." Sayori remarked.

"I'm a meter and a quarter tall! I'm a little gremlin now!" Natsuki gesticulated.

"I don't like being two and a half meters... but I do like to have my girlfriend be so snuggly." Yuri scooped up Natsuki and hugged her tightly.

"Stop! I don't like being smol! Help Monika!"

"Nah. You're both too adorable."

Natsuki let out a shout of tsundere annoyance as Yuri broke out a massive grin.

Sayori definitely was taking a picture of this for the scrapbook.

31.5 – You Can Choose Your Friends But You Can't Choose Your Family, by Awesomedude17.

(DDLC)/(Winx Club)

"Okay everyone, we got a bit of news regarding Yuri. Yuri?" Monika started off.

"Thank you. Sayori, Natsuki, I am now a fully-fledged vampire now, thanks to Alucard of the Hellsing Organization."

Polite clapping came from the occupants...

Including an unfamiliar fourth clapper.

All eyes turned to the Latina by the door, looking like she found exactly what she was looking for.

"Alucard told me he was siring a new vampire, but he was incredibly vague about it."

"Who are you?" Monika demanded.

"Sorry. Musa noticed that you were acting abnormally so I asked my wife to temporarily transfer my mind here. I'm Flora, Anchor to Alfea and the magical realms, and Yuri, was it?"

"Yes?"

"Say hello to your big sister." Flora then quickly pulled Yuri into a big hug, leaving the purple haired woman both incredibly confused and incredibly flustered.

"Wait, sister?"

"Well... yeah. Seras more or less said that we were basically sisters after I became Alucard's ward."

"You think that Alucard or Seras would have let us know about you before Yuri went through with this." Sayori pointed out the obvious.

"To be fair, we needed some time off, but now we can go forward and leave the bad thing behind."

Monika looked at Flora with concern but decided against figuring out what.

She was a vampire far longer than Yuri was and having someone like that in a bad mood was not a good idea.

"I-I have a-a... sister?" Yuri squeaked out.

"Let my girlfriend go. You're making her catatonic." Natsuki deadpanned.

Flora quickly let go, moved back and laughed nervously.

"Oh. Heh... sorry."

"Right. Well hopefully we'll have the time to meet with you for real, Flora. Thanks for joining us today." Monika said.

"If you say so, Monika. Bye Sayori. Keep your world stable." Flora made a motion and then disappeared.

"Did she seriously think Sayori was the Anchor?" Natsuki asked.

"That happens more often than you'd expect, Nats." Sayori admitted.

31.6 – The Band, Remastered, by Tetradrachm.

" *Flies are buzzing 'round my head, vultures circling the dead, picking up every last crumb,"* Monika's amplified singing echoed through the digital school building, backed up by a powerful bass drum beat, keys, and guitar.

Within moments, Natsuki burst through the music room doors, near frantic. "You're putting the band back together," she yelped, "and you didn't invite me!?"

Immediately the group—the rest of the girls—stopped, and Yuri shot Monika a smug look. "I knew that would get her up here," she announced, and then turned to Natsuki with a more critical expression. "Did you really think I'd join the group without you? We just figured this would be the fastest way to get you up here." Monika created a new fake book* and music stand for Natsuki out of thin air while Sayori leaned over and adjusted her seat's height.

"But—you—ugh! Fine," Natsuki growled, snatching the bass up from its perch and adjusting the book on its stand. "You wouldn't come down two flights of stairs just to fetch your cute girlfriend in person? And why're we reading from a book now?"

"Monika was impatient," Yuri explained, glancing over at the other girl flipping through her just-now conjured fake book. "She had a new idea for the group, see."

"It was because we never actually got around to writing any music the first time," Monika said primly. "The band fell apart because we didn't have anything to play, so I figured we should try our hand at covers."

"When we do write our own album, we're totally still calling it 'Sugar Coated Vengeance,' " Sayori chimed in cheerfully.

"Uh huh," Natsuki said doubtfully, flipping through her book quickly before staring at the cover again. "Wait a minute..."

"And, well, Radiohead is a classic group," Monika continued, "so I figured we could start with—"

"A joke reference!" Natsuki snarled. "A stupid joke!"

" *OK Computer* is a great album!" Monika defended herself, as Yuri burst into giggles. "The music is compelling and not overly complex, while we can connect with its themes of isolation on a personal level!"

"That doesn't change the fact that it's stupid, and barely one step up from a pun! No way!" Natsuki spun away from the stand, arms crossed.

Sayori sighed. "This is why I wanted to cover Babymetal..."

"Babymetal?" Natsuki gasped. "Yes! They're awesome!"

"But the themes!" Monika protested.

"If Nats wants it, I want it," Yuri decided.

With a great sigh, Monika snapped her fingers and the books swapped out for Babymetal covers. "Fine..."

31.7 – I Cannot Believe We're Talking About This, by Awesomedude17.

"What's poutine?" Monika asked.

"Fries smothered in gravy and cheese curds. Grif insisted that I learn what that is back when we were with those guys in the box canyon." Natsuki replied.

"Of course Grif would insist. That sounds exactly like his favorite side dish."

"Actually, I'm sure it's something deep fried but that's besides the point. Why're you so interested in Canadian cuisine?"

Monika brought up a picture of poutine with technicolor gravy.

"Unicorn poutine's been causing an uproar online. Quebec in particular."

"Well I wasn't down for poutine to begin with so this doesn't really do much for me."

"Fair. Was just wondering what poutine was."

"I do agree that it's pretty garish though."

"Well it's not like gravy and cheese curds were gonna be pretty anyway."

"True,"

31.8 – Claptrap Screws Up Once Again, by Boohooo!

(DDLC)/(Borderlands)

"...How? Just how!?" Monika asked bluntly as Sayori put a medal on Hiroaka's neck.

"I don't know..." Claptrap muttered.

"How did you lose a rap battle against someone who can't speak?" Monika continued.

"Because he sucks." Natsuki snickered.

"SAYORIIIIII! NATSUKI'S BEING MEAN TO ME AGAIN!" Claptrap whined.

"Nats, be nice." Sayori scolded. Claptrap smugly flipped Natsuki off. Natsuki glared.

"Well, Claptrap, nice seeing y-" Yuri began.

"The Psychoes aren't in this Loop." Claptrap deadpanned. Yuri pouted.

31.9 – Wherein Sayori Does Not Press "A", by Wookywok.

"Hey, Monika. Did you happen to see a thing of blue frosting? I can't seem to – what in the actual fricking-fricky-frick is going on here?"

Every desk, chair, and table in the clubroom was moved – 'moved' meaning 'haphazardly piled into a single corner of the room.' Monika

was sitting on the floor, tapping away at a laptop.

Sayori's voice emerged from the heap of furniture. "Oh, hey Nats! I'm helping Moni do some bugtesting!"

Natsuki raised an eyebrow. "And this translates to… that? Somehow? I guess?"

"She's trying to get a bunch of objects in one place so that they can push her and make her clip through the wall," Monika stated, not looking up from her computer.

"Aaaaand… *how* long has she been at this?"

"About five hours now," came the reply from the corner. "But I *think* I should be getting somewheEEEEEEEEEERRRRrrrrrr…"

Monika and Natsuki both jumped a bit at the sudden yelling. "I think she succeeded. Uuuuuhhhh…" She glanced to her computer. "Uh, Nats. Do you think you could bring Sayori back? I'd do it myself, but I need to compile this."

Natsuki sighed, then made a swift tugging motion, causing Sayori to crash through the ceiling. She winced. "You okay, Veepee?"

"Look at all the pretty birdies…"

"Yeah, I'm gettin' an ice pack."

31.10 – A Cheesy Joke, by MaracaRin.

(DDLC)/(Long Live the Queen)

"Loops like this are quite common, you say?"

"Oh yeah. If you've got an easily punned name, Yggdrasil will make the most of it as much as it can. Take it from me; I've spent at least one Loop as almost every variation of my name out there, even if the pronunciation is wrong."

"How do you mean? Surely it would at least honor your name in some way?"

The shorter girl laughed, then started shifting form rapidly. "I've been a gnat, a bat, a rat, and more. And that's not even mentioning the *several* varieties of cat or cat girl I've Looped into. The kicker is that my name is NOT-suki. See what I mean?"

Elodie raised an eyebrow. "I... see how that could be frustrating. Still, I wonder why the Tree decided for you to appear in *this* loop, of all times."

"Maybe it's just because it wanted me to explain that the pun Loops aren't gonna stop any time soon." Natsuki shrugged. "Or maybe it's trying to tell me that I'm lucky that I haven't looped in as a block of stinky cheese."

"Hey, who are you calling stinky?" Brie-ony tried to look threatening.

It's hard to do that without a face, however.

31.11 – The Boy Is Back, by Skaz Wolfman.

' *New day, new loop,'* thought Sayori as she left her house with an apple in one hand and a book in the other; *Doomed Planet Doldrums* by Travelling Looper Rin Asunaro, her first published contribution to Looping Literature. Sayori followed her muscle memory down one block, across the street, then hard right and across the other street, to the corner where Hiroaka would be waiting for her. Without taking her eyes off of the book, she perfunctorily greeted him with a "Morning, dear" and continued walking toward the school. She took a bite out of her apple.

Hurried footsteps behind her, and then a voice. A male voice that tickled at Sayori's most ancient memories; memories that she knew were fictitious. "Dear? What the heck is *that* about?"

Sayori stopped in her tracks. She slowly lowered her book and looked up at the boy next to her, who had stopped a couple steps ahead of her. He was looking back at her *with brown eyes and a raised eyebrow* . Sayori blinked at him. She looked though him, through the world around them, into the game's code, making sure it was still there. *'Not a bio loop. Just a Variant.'*

She smiled at him and said, "Well, you're very dear to me, you know." She took another bite out of her apple and continued walking.

He made a face at her and said, "Don't say weird things like that, alright? People might get the wrong idea about us."

"How do you figure that?" Sayori asked innocently around a mouthful of apple, reading her book again.

"They might get the idea you love me, or something," he muttered.

"And what would be so wrong with thinking that? I *do* love you, silly."

The boy spluttered. Sayori chuckled.

…

Sayori entered the clubroom, where the others were already waiting for her. "So, we've got one of those 'Hiroaka has a face and talks with it' Variants. Been a while, hasn't it?" she asked.

"Say what?" asked Natsuki, looking up from a mandala she was drawing. She was crouched in a sandbox full of multi-colored sand in the middle of the room. "He had a talking face *last* loop."

"And *your* last loop was six loops ago," Monika remarked suspiciously. She screwed up her face in thought, and then her eyes widened. "And he's had a face and a voice in all those loops, too! We've had the same Variant *seven loops in a row* ."

"How did you *not* notice that before now?" asked Sayori, hands on her hips.

"I spend most of my time *actively* not thinking about him, okay? Sue me," Monika grumped.

"In other Branches, consecutive loops of the same 'Variant' usually means it's not a Variant at all, but an Expansion," said Yuri, setting down the skull she had been silvering.

"Impossible," said Monika, pulling up a virtual screen. "There's nothing in our game now that hasn't *always* been in our game…my own additions notwithstanding, of course."

"Could it have something to do with the Refactoring?" asked Yuri. "Our Pockets work again, so based on what Skuld said that means the Admins have all that sorted."

"Ganesha mentioned that the sudden spike in Yggdrasil's recovery progress *could* have unexpected ramifications for the less stable Branches…like ours," Monika recalled. She nodded, as if having made a decision. "Sayori, please bring Hiroaka here, right away."

…

"What are you playing at, dragging me *out of class* like that, Sayori?" he asked as she pulled him along down the hall by his arm.

"Hush, you," Sayori said shortly. "I'll explain when we get there."

"If this is about clubs–"

"Yes and no and I said I'd explain when we get there," Sayori repeated patiently.

They reached the clubroom, and Sayori pushed him towards the others.

"What do you remember," Monika asked him immediately, practically getting in his face.

"…uh…I…wha?" he stammered, blushing furiously.

"Don't be distracted by my pretty eyes, you silly boy," Monika told him, "Do you know my name?"

"Y-you're M-Monika," he managed to reply.

"And do you know *their* names?" she pointed at Natsuki and Yuri.

"…why–"

"Ignore the sandbox and skulls and answer the question," Monika ordered.

"I don't know them!" the poor frazzled boy yelped. He whirled around to face Sayori. "What the hell kind of prank is this, Sayori?!" he demanded.

"I'll get back to you when *I* figure that out," Sayori replied.

Monika leaned back against a desk, arms folded. "A lot of the mods I've added work together to create the sensory-perception emulation that makes our game seem more like the real world to us," she said, slowly and thoughtfully. "Maybe this is some kind of emergent intelligence caused by the mods being affected by a change in our Branch's code? Just because nothing's been added to our *game's* data doesn't mean there hasn't been an addition to our *universe's* data."

"Which we need an Admin to check," said Yuri. Monika nodded, and picked up a pen a notebook on the desk she was leaning against.

"Alright, I'm done," grumbled the boy, "Good joke, Sayori. You got me," he deadpanned.

Sayori held up a hand, and he found he couldn't move. "Hold onto your pants, Hiroaka; we're getting to the bottom of this," she said.

"…who?" asked the boy.

Sayori blinked. "Sorry, I meant to say 'Hold onto your pants, Kevin; we're getting to the bottom of this.' My bad."

"Nice save," said Natsuki dryly.

"Why can't I move?!"

Before Sayori could answer, an elephant appeared in the room. More accurately, an elephant-headed man.

Kevin's subsequent scream of terror was drowned out by Ganesha's voice. " **GREETINGS, YOUNG LADIES.** "

" *Hey, Big G,* " the Literature Club chorused in reply.

" **TO ANSWER YOUR QUESTION, MONIKA, YES, THE REFACTORING HAS ALLOWED ME TO FINALLY BESTOW A BOONFUL PATCH UPON YOUR BRANCH, RESOLVING A VERY PECULIAR AND LONGSTANDING BUG CONCERNING YOUR GAME'S PROTAGONIST. GIVEN YOUR INQUIRY, I PRESUME THE PATCH HAS WORKED?** "

"If by that you mean he's acting like a normal person, yes," said Monika. She frowned. "What bug?"

" **THE ONE YOU ERRONEOUSLY FELT RESPONSIBLE FOR, MONIKA,** " replied Ganesha, facing her. " **YOUR BRANCH, BEING *ALMOST* UNSTABLE ENOUGH TO HAVE WARRANTED QUARANTINE–WHICH IT MAY HAVE RECEIVED REGARDLESS HAD IT NOT BEEN ACTIVATED BY YGGDRASIL'S INSCRUTABLE WHIMSY–SUFFERED A MINOR LEVEL OF DATA CORRUPTION IN THE COURSE OF ITS ACTIVATION. THINK OF IT AS A FEW 'LEAVES' BEING LOST DUE TO THE BRANCH 'SHAKING' FROM ITS OWN ACTIVATION INTO THE LOOPS PROTOCOL. THANKS TO MY EFFORTS, THOSE 'LEAVES' HAVE BEEN RECOVERED.** "

"Wh-what are you saying?" asked Monika, her voice shaking.

"He's saying you didn't 'kill' Hiroaka, like you thought you did," said Yuri.

" **BUT OF COURSE YOU DID NOT,** " said Ganesha, " **IF YOU HAD BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS ODD CONDITION, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN UNDONE BY THE LOOPS. ONLY ADMIN-LEVEL BEINGS CAN AFFECT YGGDRASIL'S CODE, AS I'M SURE YOU KNOW.** "

"Yes, but…but Sayori, Yuri, Natsuki, they all carry elements of what I did to them in our Baseline!" said Monika, "My actions *before* the Loops must have effected their code!"

" **MY DEAR, YOU ARE CONFUSING THE SOUL WITH THE MIND. COMMON MISTAKE FOR MORTALS. WHAT YOU BELIEVE TO HAVE BEEN DAMAGE TO THEIR CODE WAS MERELY PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA, WHICH THEY HAVE SINCE INTERNALIZED IN THEIR OWN WAYS. WHAT YOU DID TO THE DIGITAL ENTITY YOU CALL 'HIROAKA' WAS NO MORE PERMANENT THAN ANYTHING ELSE YOU COULD HAVE DONE TO HIM DURING ANY GIVEN LOOP. YOU WERE NO MORE AN ADMIN-LEVEL BEING BEFORE YOU BEGAN LOOPING THAN YOU ARE NOW.** "

"But–!"

" **TO BE QUITE BLUNT, MONIKA, YOU GIVE YOURSELF FAR TOO MUCH CREDIT. YOU GROSSLY OVERESTIMATE YOUR ABILITY TO INFLICT HARM. YOU SIMILARLY UNDERESTIMATE OUR CAUTION WITH REGARDS TO ANYTHING THAT CAN EVEN HYPOTHETICAL WORSEN YGGDRASIL'S CURRENT STATE. IF THERE WAS *ANY* CHANCE THAT YOU WERE CAPABLE OF EVEN THE SMALL AMOUNT OF DAMAGE YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE, I CAN ASSURE YOU WE NEVER WOULD HAVE ALLOWED YOUR BRANCH TO LOOP.** "

"Then why didn't you ever tell me?!" Monika screamed, though the effect was rather underwhelming in any setting where Ganesha had

been speaking for more than a few seconds.

" **THREE REASONS. FIRSTLY, I AM A VERY BUSY ADMINISTRATOR, AND THUS IT WAS RATHER SOME TIME BEFORE I EVER *NOTICED* THE DEGREE TO WHICH YOU HELD YOURSELF ACCOUNTABLE FOR YOUR BRANCH'S STATE. SECONDLY, BY THAT TIME YOU AND YOUR LOOPERS HAD SETTLED INTO A VERY STABLE DYNAMIC, AND WHILE YOU WERE NOT ESPECIALLY HAPPY WITH YOURSELF YOU WERE VERY STABLE. I COULD HAVE SPARED A MOMENT, PERHAPS, TO ASSUAGE YOUR FEARS, BUT I CANNOT OVERSTATE HOW VERY BUSY I AM; AS ONE OF THE UPPERMOST ECHELON OF YGGDRASIL'S CODE ENGINEERS, I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR MORE UNSTABLE BRANCHES THAN JUST YOURS, AND MY LESS PROFICIENT COLLEAGUES OFTEN CALL ON ME FOR AID AS WELL. THUS, I LEFT YOU TO YOUR RUMINATIONS BECAUSE, THIRDLY, *YOU NEVER THOUGHT TO ASK ME* . WHILE YOUR FRIENDS HAVE OCCASSIONALLY WRITTEN ME THIS OR THAT BURNING QUESTION, YOU, MONIKA, HAVE ADDRESSED ME PRECISELY THRICE IN THE ENTIRE TIME SINCE I INTRODUCED MYSELF TO YOU. FIRSTLY, AND QUITE RESPONSIBLY I FEEL I MUST ADD, TO ARRANGE A SERIES OF LOOPS FOR YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS TO WORK ON SELF-DEFENSE SKILLS. SECONDLY, AND QUITE COMPASSIONATELY I AM PROUD TO SAY, TO HELP AMELIORATE THE UNFORTUNATE PREDICAMENT OF THAT RIN CHILD. AND THIRDLY, NOW.** "

Monika stared at him in stricken silence. Ganesha continued, " **LIKE ANY GOOD ADMIN, I AM INTIMATELY FAMILIAR WITH EVERY BIT AND BYTE OF DATA CONCERNING THE BRANCHES AND LOOPERS IN MY CHARGE. I AM AWARE OF YOUR MISOTHEISTIC PREDISPOSITION. I AM SADDENED THAT YOU FEEL THE WAY YOU DO, BUT GIVEN YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES WITH POWER I DO NOT FAULT YOU FOR BEING SO SUSPICIOUS OF BEINGS MORE POWERFUL THAN YOURSELF. AS HARD AT WORK AS I AM HELPING WITH**

YGGDRASIL'S RECOVERY PROCESS, I AM NOT ABOUT TO RISK WASTING MY VALUABLE TIME VOLUNTEERING INFORMATION THAT IS NOT STRICTLY ESSENTIAL TO INDIVIDUALS THAT MIGHT NOT EVEN BELIEVE ME. THUS DID I RESOLVE TO PUT YOU AND YOUR SELF-ABSORBED GUILT COMPLEX OUT OF MY MIND, AT LEAST FOR SO LONG AS YOU REMAINED A STABLE ANCHOR, AND FOCUS MY TIME AND ENERGY WHERE I *KNEW* IT WOULD BE HELPFUL. "

"…I'm sorry, Ganesha," Monika murmured, her voice a little choked.

" **YOU OWE ME NO APOLOGY,** " said Ganesha in a tone that would have seemed very gentle, if he weren't so damned loud. " **YOU ARE AS YOU ARE, AND NOT WITHOUT YOUR OWN FAIR REASONS. I ONLY HOPE THAT YOU CAN LEARN TO TRUST YOUR NEXT ADMIN MORE THAN YOU TRUSTED ME.** "

"Waaaait, our *next* Admin?" asked Sayori. "Are…are you going on vacation, or something?"

" **NOT IN THIS EPOCH, SADLY,** " said Ganesha with a trumpeting chuckle. " **I HAD SCHEDULED TIME OUT OF MY DAY TO GIVE YOU THIS NEWS IN A FEW LOOPS, BUT SEEING AS I AM ALREADY 'IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD' AS IT WERE…AS I JUST FINISHED EXPLAINING, MY SUPERLATIVE LEVEL OF SKILL IS IN VERY HIGH DEMAND IN THESE TRYING TIMES, AND WITH THE WORST OF YOUR BRANCH'S DESTABILIZING ELEMENTS RESOLVED BY MY TIRELESS TOIL, I HAVE DECIDED TO ENTRUST IT, AND YOU FOUR, TO ANOTHER ADMIN. ALSO QUITE COMPETENT, I ASSURE YOU, BUT ALSO MUCH LESS PREOCCUPIED. YOUR BRANCH IS STILL FAIRLY UNSTABLE, FOR ITS SIZE, AND YOU NEED AN ADMIN WHO CAN AFFORD YOU MORE ATTENTION THAN I, AS THIS EXCHANGE SOMEWHAT DEMONSTRATES.** "

"Whoa. New Admin," said Natsuki. "That's…that's a big deal, isn't it? Branches changing Admins, that doesn't happen very often, does it?"

" **QUITE RARELY, YES. USUALLY BECAUSE SOMETHING HAS GONE VERY WRONG, SUCH AS WHEN ARES UNTHINKINGLY ACTIVATED SOVEREIGN. BUT NOT ALWAYS. HECATE GAVE MADOKA THE SMASH BRANCH TO REDUCE HER OWN IMMENSE WORKLOAD. I AM ENTRUSTING YOUR BRANCH TO PSYCHE FOR SIMILAR REASONS.** "

"Psyche?" asked Sayori, shooting a glance at Yuri.

"Mortal wife of Eros, daughter-in-law of Aphrodite," said Yuri. "I don't recall that she has a domain, per se, but her name is Greek for 'soul'."

"Mortal?" asked Monika, snapping out of her daze.

" **INDEED. BORN MORTAL, ASCENDED AFTER MARRYING INTO THE OLYMPIAN CLAN. I SOUGHT OUT A FORMERLY-HUMAN ADMIN SPECIFICALLY, HOPING YOU MIGHT FIND HER EASIER TO TRUST THAN ONE SUCH AS MYSELF WHO WAS BORN A GOD.** " Monika grimaced, but Ganesha stepped forward and laid a meaty hand on her shoulder, " **IMPERFECTION IS MERELY A TRANSITORY STATE, NOT BY ANY MEANS AN INESCAPABLE ONE. YOU ARE NOT A FINISHED NOVEL, YOU ARE A WORK IN PROGRESS. KEEP LIVING YOUR STORY AND GROWING INTO YOUR ROLE IN THE GREATER NARRATIVE OF THE WORLD. YOU WILL FIND CONTENTMENT IN YOURSELF, ONE DAY. ALL SOULS DO, HOWEVER MANY LIFETIMES IT TAKES.** "

Sayori abruptly glomped onto Ganesha's side. "I know we never got to know you, very well, but I'm going to miss you anyways, Big G," she told him, before stepping back.

" **AND I SHALL MISS LOOKING UPON YOUR WHIMSICAL ANTICS. YOU WILL BE IN GOOD HANDS. I WILL SEE YOU AT LEAST ONCE MORE, WHEN I INTRODUCE YOU TO PSYCHE. UNTIL THEN, CHILDREN.** " With a pachyderm fanfare, the elephant-headed god's avatar dematerialized from their presence.

"Oh, hey. 'Kevin' passed out," Natsuki remarked, pointing at the boy who had fainted shortly after the Admin's arrival. "So, he's people now, huh? Well, in as much as we were before we became Loopers. Which, I guess, means he goes back to being a puppet on a script if Monika disables her mods, right?"

"Seems like–OH CRAP!" Monika yelled before disappearing. She reappeared a moment later. "WOW that was close, we almost ate a loop crash."

"Why?!" Sayori asked.

"Game was frozen this whole time. Player almost uninstalled us," Monika explained.

"So…this means, maybe, someday, he might start Looping?" asked Sayori.

Monika sighed. "Maaaaaybe? I don't know…remember, the personality he 'demonstrates' is just my modifications to the game filling in behavioral procedures based on his scripted actions. He's *not* an AI, just a *very* sophisticated imitation of one."

"But as he is now, he's as much a person as Natsuki and I were before we became Loopers," Yuri pointed out. "If it's *truly* impossible for him to Loop, than you and Sayori should likewise be the only Loopers from our Branch. You two were the only ones who achieved sentience in Baseline."

"Yes and no," said Monika, "We were alone in seeing through the fourth wall outright. But you and Natsuki demonstrated enough self-awareness to realize something was wrong with the world when I got hack-happy. *He* never did."

"MONIKA'S THIGHS!" Natsuki cried out in anguish. "I am SO fucking sick and tired of us arguing back and forth over this. By the authority vested in me by my Bakabane," she conjured the named *kanabo* , "I'm declaring this subject CLOSED! From now on, we all treat him

like people, like Sayori always has, now that he's livelier than a piece of furniture and can carry a conversation. If he *can* Loop, then he will eventually, and if he can't then he won't. Either way, we stop discussing hypotheticals and just see what the hell happens. Are we agreed?"

"I second the motion," said Yuri in a tone so weary that the other three had to stifle yawns.

"All in favor?" asked Monika, hand already in the air, along with Yuri's and Natsuki's. After a moment, Sayori sighed and put her hand up as well. "Motion passes unanimously. Hereafter we're all agreed to never again speculate on the odds of our game's player character Looping, and just see what happens. If anything." Then Monika snapped her fingers, and 'Kevin' disappeared. "I put his sprite back where he should be. Sayori–"

"Go wait for him to wake up so I can bring him to the club properly, got it," the vice-president replied before skipping out of the room.

Compiler's Commentary:

31.1: IT'S FINALLY DONE! YURI IS A FULL-FLEDGED VAMPIRE NOW! ***MWAHAHAHAHAHAHA! [choking noises]***

31.2: Fortunate indeed that Monika speaks fluent Flusterese.

31.3: Yaaaay, Christmas music!

31.4: Yaaaay, cuteness!

31.5: Yaaaay, sisterhood!

31.6: Y'know, I meant to do more with this back when I started it, but…then I didn't. I need to stop not doing things.

31.7: I got a special kick out of this. I'm from Michigan, and poutine is kind of a delicacy around here. MAJOR deal during summer festivals.

31.8: On that day, a voiceless boy spit fire…somehow…

31.9: A wise man, known to some as Lord Moonstone, once said that video games are just programmers putting on elaborate magic shows and hoping like hell you don't notice the trick that makes everything fall apart.

31.10: As our own Wookywok often says, you shouldn't make cheese puns at someone without their parmesan.

31.11: Oh, hey, something I wrote. Don't see that every daaaaaaa-oh. Oh yeah, this changes *everything* …actually it only changes a couple things but still. For those who don't Japanese, "Bakabane" roughly translates to "Dummy Killer" (literally "Baka kabane" == "idiot corpse" but idiogramatic languages are flexible in how various characters can be interpreted). It was originally just "Bakabane" (bane of baka, or bane of idiots) but BIOS-Pherecydes used his superior weeb powers to make it better, so mad props to him. This kind of thing is why he runs the Infinite Loops Anime thread.

One Mooooore Thing: A "FactorySmoke" said in a review, "Firstly, can't believe you not only turned a Porter Robinson song into a Looping universe, but pulled it off spectacularly. Congrats. Secondly, damn you for making me feel feels. I'd just gotten only the video dammit-"

Well, FactorySmoke, Masterweaver's DDLC/Shelter snip was indeed pretty dang great. But proper credit for Shelter's Activation goes to my dear friend Solomongrndy (Solly for short). Now, I could give you directions to where to find it on the Spacebattles threads, because the Shelter Loops don't have their own compilation...

But honestly, it'd just be easier to post it here. So...BONUS SNIP!

Solomongrndy: Hey all, I just saw Shelter By Porter Robinson and the ending made me need to add it to the Infinite Loops, so that the main character (Rin) doesn't just drift into space alone for admins only know how long. The nature of it seems like something that should be in this thread, which is why I'm reviving it, and if it isn't I apologize, I'd have put it into a Misc. thread, but all of those are closed or locked for even longer.

Shelter Activation:

Rin woke up the day after discovering her lost memories expecting to be in the same bed she had been in for the last 7 years. That she awoke to a ceiling that she had only just remembered was a shock but not a great one.

Thinking that the simulation had just embedded her memories into itself like it had done the day previous, she reached for her tablet, only to realize it wasn't where she left it.

Sitting up just made the changes even more obvious, she was tiny. And when her hair fell into her face it was dark brown, not the red with sparkles it had been since her father had placed her in the simulation.

Freaking out a little Rin got up and tried to call the tablet to herself, but nothing happened. She tried again, still nothing.

A knock at the door startled her.

"Rin, it's time to get up. Don't you want to go to the park today?"

Rin looked up in shock. "Dad!?"

She rushed to the door and tore it open as fast as her 5-year-old body could manage.

"DAD!" she launched herself at him while bawling her eyes out.

"Hey there." he knelt down and hugged her close as she soaked his shirt in tears. "What's wrong sweetheart?"

Through the blubbering, he was able to make out "Earth ended...everyone else dead...simulation...so lonely…"

"Shhh. it's gonna be alright sweetie, it was just a nightmare, Dad's here now, don't worry."

"Dad, it was so real, my memories from it aren't fading either. I missed you so much, please don't leave me alone again."

"I'll be with you always."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Shigeru watched as the rocket he had built for Rin, Shelter, lifted off into space, it was just ahead of the planetary impact and would be just fast enough to avoid the debris ejected.

"I'm sorry, Rin, I couldn't make a rocket that could hold both of us. But I'll always be with you, if not physically."

Rin cried as she came to in her virtual world once again. She knew her father had done exactly as she had dreamed he would. She was going to be all alone for who knew how long.

A voice behind her broke her sobbing, "Rin, I'm still here, I might not have been able to send my body along, but I managed to send a copy of my mind."

"Dad!" just as she had done when she awoke with all those scary memories, she launched herself at her father and hugged him for all he was worth.

With her father there with her for it, Rin learned much more than just the simple manipulation she remembered doing when she had been all alone. He had taught her all about the programming and systems that went into creating Shelter. And her time in the simulation didn't feel nearly as lonely nor as long. So it came as a surprise when she once again woke up as a five-year old in her room back on Earth.

"What is going on!"

...damn it, where'd I put those tissues?

Well, anyways, uh...shit, what now? I've never run past the Commentary before. How do I end this? How do I get out of here?! AM I TRAPPED IN HERE FOREVER NOW?!

Oh, wait, there's the exit. Um. See you all later then, I guess?

Wolfman, out!

Chapter 32

32.1 — Doki Doki Mad-Lib Club!, by Master_Spoilers

"Hey, Everyone!" Sayori ran into the clubroom. "Look out the window! It's [*Precipitation*]-ing [*Plural Noun*]!"

"[*Precipitation*]-ing [*Plural Noun*]?" Monika asked.

Sayori nodded. "Out of the [*Place*]!"

"[*Plural Noun*]..." Yuri began, before being cut off by Natsuki.

"No need to ask why! Just open your [*Body Part*] and [*Verb*] your eyes!"

"It's [*Precipitation*]-ing [*Plural Noun*]!" Sayori shouted again. "It's [*Precipitation*]-ing [*Plural Noun*]!"

Yuri calmly walked over to the window and looked outside. "Out in the [*Other Place*]." She noted.

"[*Precipitation*]-ing [*Plural Noun*]..." Monika repeated thoughtfully.

Natsuki looked out the window. "All you can [*Other Verb*]!" She proclaimed with a massive grin on her face. "There's [*Other Noun*] and [*Food*]..."

"[*Third Noun*] and meat!" Sayori finished.

"...It's [*Precipitation*]-ing [*Plural Noun*]." Monika concluded. And that was all that needed to be said. All four girls put on their coats and ran outside, cheering.

The sole non-Looper watched them leave in confusion. "How were they able to talk like that?" [*Male Name*] wondered.

32.2 — A Day for Themselves, by Venku

Monika Awoke and sent out an obligatory ping. Receiving three responses let her know that this loop might just be a normal day. She decided to check on the others of her club, and see if anyone had any gossip to share.

Entering the club room, the brunette gave it a cursory glance. No Hiroaka.. *No that's Kevin. Need to remember that* ...she chided herself, so he was likely not present yet. Natsuki was treating one of her magic hammers with wood varnish by the closet. Sayori was meditating by the window, the sunlight reflecting off of her peach coloured hair. Yuri was preparing their afternoon tea. Everything seemed peaceful and perfect until a loud shriek of rage came from the purple haired woman.

"Alright." Yuri slammed her palms onto the table. "I'm only going to ask this once. Who. The hell. Covered my cleaver with Barney stickers?"

"Wasn't me," Sayori replied, continuing her meditation and ignoring the purple hued glare.

"I just got here," Monika added, ignoring the death like glare from the other girl.

"H-Hey! Yuyu why do you think it was me?" Natsuki placed the varnish down and looked at her lover with an innocent expression.

"Because if Sayori didn't do it, and Monika wasn't here it was you, dear." the woman growled as she looked down. "Also you're the only one here who would think Barney was cute!"

"H-Hey! Just because I like cute doesn't mean I think that dinosaur was! I'd have liked our time in that Teletubbies loop if I did!" Natsuki growled as she rose. "And while we're lobbing out accusations here who the hell moved my Manga collection? It's always been in the closet and when I came here today it was over by the window!"

"Wasn't me. I love you but you know how I feel about your Manga!"

"And I didn't touch your damn cleaver!"

Yuri growled. "Be reasonable Natty. If need be we'll have to go to the Holodeck to settle this!."

"COME ON! YOU AND ME! WE'LL SEE HOW WELL YOU CAN FIGHT AFTER A FEW RIPPLES!"

As the two other Looping Literature Club members walked out the room, arguing and sniping at each other, Monika approached the only one who said nothing. Who was still deep in her meditations, and who was silently giggling.

"Veep? Did you cover the cleaver? And move Natsuki's manga?"

One eye opened and showed her bright blue eyes tinged with yellow. "Kevin was given the Force Suggestion to stay home today," Sayori commented, her voice betraying what Monika thought was her emotions. "He's under the impression that I wasn't feeling well and he'd check in on me tomorrow."

"Those two," and a hand waved to the departing door. "refused to talk about it but it seemed they had a bad loop, as did I. They'll fight about it then talk about it. I'm just here trying to meditate and calm myself after the last loop" Both eyes open now, and while the yellow remained, it was starting to fade back into the clear blue. "As the one who seemed to be the most emotionally attuned to the others, I figured a small nudge would help them work through it."

Monika nodded as she heard Sayori's reasoning. Though she held up her finger in the patent-pending 'Monika's tips' pose. "Yes but don't forget yourself. You're also apparently recovering from an annoying loop. Or something that affected you. What say you help me clean up and we spend the rest of the day seeing if we can binge on cute kitten videos and silly movies?" the club president offered.

"Okay!" Sayori chirped as she rose. Monika just smiled. *Never change, Sayori,* she thought with affection.

32.3 — Dokfiniti Train: The Grid Car, by Masterweaver

(DDLC)/(Infinity Train)

Monika woke up already Awake, which was always an interesting contradiction. There was a vague ache somewhere in her skull, fading quickly. And the room around her was...

Well, it was a room.

Gridlines went across the floor, up the walls, and over the ceiling. Her hand pressed against one of the squares-and a colored cube spontaneously generated out of it.

"Ah. Puzzle game loop." She stood, stretching her arms over her head-and noticing a glowing green number on her right palm. "And I am apparently subject 2017. Isn't that cute."

Her foot tapped against the floor, absently generating a stack of cubes as she put her hands on her hips and looked around the room. Two identical doors stood at opposite sides of the chamber-red arched double doors, with a pair of semicircular golden handles on each. The handles were not directly mirrored, strangely enough; their corners touched in the center of the door, but one went up the upper half of the door, and the other turned down.

Kicking aside the stack of blocks, Monika walked over to the door and tugged the handles experimentally. "Locked-no..." She rotated them around their shared point, tugging again and opening the door to see a large copper-green building linked by a small bridge. "Okay... that's an odd way to latch this. But if I can just progress, what's the point of this room?"

A sound from behind her made her turn around, witnessing another person enter the room. A girl straddling the line between preteen and

teen, it seemed, with an orange ponytail and surprised eyes in a dark-green hue behind a set of wireframe glasses.

"Hmm." Monika tried to release a ping, but frowned when nothing happened. "Null loop... of course."

"Uh..." The girl waved, carefully shutting the door behind her. "Hey! How long have you been on the train?"

Monika blinked, glancing out the door she had opened. What she had assumed to be a building was actually a strangely designed and massive train car, as evidenced by the wheels the size of elephants and the desolate landscape rushing past.

"...Approximately one and a half minutes," she replied, turning back with a small smile as she shut the door. "Well, I just Woke Up here, I mean. Are you a local?"

"Well, no, I'm a passenger like you." The girl took the glove off her right hand, holding it up to show off her own number-153. "See?"

"So it's a ticket system."

"More like a countdown. You get the number down to zero, and the train opens a portal back home." The girl rubbed her arm awkwardly. "Thing is, to get it to go down... you kind of have to learn more about yourself. Figure out something... personal and important, that you're stuck on."

Monika glanced at the number on her own hand and heaved a sigh. "Of course. Somehow, I am unsurprised. What's the rate of decrease on these?"

"It's variable. You can drop by fifty in one car, go three more without a change, and then drop by two more points in the next one." The girl cleared her throat. "Plus... the numbers can go up if you go against whatever issue the train decided was worth its attention."

"Oh! Oh! Miss Tulip!" A small white sphere bisected by a vertical black band crawled out of the girl's backpack and onto her shoulder. "Who are you talking to? Oh! Hello!" The thing waved a tiny leg, the vertically aligned pair of dots on the black band shifting to arcs. "You look like Miss Tulip but older!"

"One-One!"

Monika laughed it off with a wave. "He's not wrong. We've both got green eyes, a ponytail, black stockings and a skirt... but coral is technically a shade of *brown,"* she added, waving her own ponytail for emphasis.

"Okay..."

"You know, I don't remember you being here," said the tiny orb, tapping its band thoughtfully. "Maybe I should ask my mother when we get to her."

Monika quirked an eyebrow. "Your mother?"

"Yeah, One-One is-" Tulip paused, glancing around carefully before leaning in. "One-One's the real conductor of the train," she said in a low voice. "There's a slot in the motherboard for him to sit in. But he was kicked out of the engine by one of the passengers-she's been using the train to try to recreate her past for years now."

"Huh."

"Yeah, I was pretty stunned when I first found out too. Of course that was-"

Tulip cut herself off.

"...That was when you were fighting her as a dramatic final confrontation?" Monika offered.

The girl's eyes whipped up to her. "How do you-?"

"Let me guess," Monika continued with a grin, tapping up a small stack of cubes. "Time's been repeating for you, and you have no idea how or why."

"Uh... yeah. Me and One-One both," Tulip confirmed. "He repeats more than I do, I've only had four times I remember, but he's had... how many times?"

"Thirty-nine!" One-One declared cheerfully. "It's been amazing! And harrowing," he added in a suddenly morose tone.

Monika nodded as she tapped the side of the uppermost cube on the stack, now about knee-height. "Well then, welcome to the multiverse, sanity optional. I'm Monika, Anchor of the Doki Doki Literature Club loops. Make yourself a seat and get comfortable." She sat down on the angular stool she'd just made. "We've got a lot to cover and... how long does this loop last?"

"Loop?"

"The time loop," Monika clarified. "Before you come back to the start."

"Oh, it's about a year," Tulip said, already halfway done with an armchair made of cubes-or maybe it was a throne.

"Well, okay, we've got time to cover this." Monika cracked her fingers. "Now, it starts with a tree called Yggdrasil..."

32.4 — Soul of a Poet, by Tetradrachm

"...and round the alabaster angel's wing, a countless flock of wonders sing..."

Natsuki glared over at Sayori as Mike—her friend's name in this loop—continued rambling on merrily. "I thought you said he wrote this just last night!" she whispered.

"That's what he told me!" Sayori whispered back.

"He's been reciting for fifteen minutes now!" Natsuki hissed. "I've been watching the clock!"

"That isn't very nice," Sayori pointed out.

Natsuki glared daggers at her—not literally; only Yuri could do that. Yuri herself appeared to have fallen asleep, while Monika was perfectly intent in a way Sayori recognized as belonging to a placeholder model while the real Monika was off messing around with code somewhere or other.

While Sayori was as overjoyed as ever to see her old friend come to life each loop, she couldn't help but admit that this version of him was a bit annoying. Apparently he was a genuine aspiring poet this time, and had been all his life; she hadn't even had to invite him to join the Literature Club because once she'd told him about it he'd immediately asked if he could join.

She almost regretted telling him about it now.

A sudden silence indicated he was done, and everyone clapped politely—except for Yuri, who was just startled into awakeness—as he shuffled through papers.

"That was wonderful!" The Monika program said automatically. "Who's next?"

"Oh, no," Mike shook his head, "that was just the first page. I've got three more..."

"Nnnope," Natsuki said. "Not doing this, not today. I've got blue milk cookies to bake. C'mon, Yuri, we're flying this coop."

Yuri muttered something incomprehensible, still half awake, as she was physically dragged out of the room by Nats.

Sayori did her very utmost best to not sigh forlornly. "Right, go ahead Mike. She's just cranky today."

She still sighed slightly.

32.5 — "Am I...a Bad Friend?" by Venku

It was another day, another millstone around the neck of the young man. Sayori's neighbor, Kevin, he of the literature club woke up with the alarm piercing a very nice dream. With a groan escaping his lips, as he would prefer to be asleep, he rolled out of bed. The alarm turned off, he padded downstairs.

Yesterday he was supposed to join the literature club after the incessant pestering of his friend. He remembered that she was always there, ever since their parents met when he was young. While the coffee was brewing, the man's mind decided to do one thing. Replay memories. And while the coffee was brewing, the drip of the coffee began to stimulate his mind. With each drop of the black liquid, he remembered:

- He remembered when Sayori skinned her knee. They were young and he didn't want to play with her. There was no reason why, he was just being stubborn. Yet she followed him. And when she fell, he felt guilty. Turning back to want to help her and treat her knee.

- Mr. Cow and Mr. Bird. There was a local festival when they were younger. Both of them were about twelve. Winning the stuffed animals and the smile on her face.

- When secondary school started they started to drift. He was not happy with her clinging to him. Always wanted to impress the other girls. Ignoring how Sayori wanted a friend. She drifted as well with his responses.

- She had called him saying she was sick yesterday. Instead of checking on her, he just stayed home and binged some of the anime. While he was happy they reconnected, he sure let the ball drop.

As the coffee finished brewing, he took a sip. A bit of self reflection caused him to think of a few things, including that if he did indeed

miss Sayori he had a crap way of showing it. An idea formed in his mind as he pulled out two bits of paper. Two separate poems were written. One in his bag for later. One to the side. After his shower, he thought to do one thing. Trying to remember what his mom cooked when he felt bad, he made a box. Rice. Noodles with no seasoning. Chicken. Some of the cookies he kept in the cabinet. Wrapping it up in a bow for Sayori, he placed the other poem on top before moving outside.

Sayori woke. The loop was still ongoing and she figured that she had enough control over her emotions to progress things like normal. Yesterday she and Monika spent the day just binging on the cat videos until late. A few rather bland Rom-coms picked up from the Star Wars universe and a video her Master Pinkie demanded they see were also played. The general consensus was that while Sayori was eternally grateful Pinkie Pie took her on as an apprentice she'd never quite understand the pony's logic concerning movies.

Her bag was packed with a book that Natsuki recommended on baking to read later. A small internal sigh was felt as she began to head to the door. Roughing up her hair for a moment to give the impression she was running late, she was surprised with a knock on the door. Weird. She peeked out the window and was surprised. Kevin.

"H-hi?" she asks, confused as he was standing there with a box in his hand. "You're..early. Ehhehe. You never came to wake me up before."

"You were sick yesterday. Give me some credit, du.." he paused. "Sayori. Of course I'd check on you."

Sayori blinked. He was going to call her dummy. While immune to the barb, she was surprised. Not used to this level of understanding. "B..but.." she was surprised as Kevin spoke.

"Look. I had a thought. A few of them. Let's..say that I try to meet you here every morning. I can't guarantee it because I'm breaking old

habits but I'd like to try. And here.." as he shoved a box into her hands. "Made you lunch."

"Aww..that's sweet" as she saw her friend blush. Figuring to not press her luck, she motioned for them to walk to school. Holding onto the bento for a moment before they split ways. She paused as there was a note on the top.

Sayori, listen.

A few things made me think hard

Am I a bad friend?

- Sorry for not checking on you. Kevin.

Blinking, she sent out a ping. Three others responded. Confused, she went to the club room.

As she entered, there was a bit of a familiar sight. Monika was currently brushing over some coding books, including Advanced Python. Yuri and Natsuki were apparently commandeering one of the tables for impromptu baking. A sniff of the air indicated fresh granny smith apples from one of their pockets. Since Kevin wasn't due in yet, Natsuki had repurposed one of the corners temporarily to bake.

Monika looked up as the other woman entered, Yuri and Natsuki chatting amicably. "You Pinged. We're already awake. Why?"

"Read this" Sayori almost ordered as she thrust the note in front of Monika. Her eyebrows lifted before reading the haiku. "Basic but.." she paused. "And what are you carrying?" In response, Sayori opened the box. "He..made a bento care box?" Sayori silently confirmed this with a nod.

"GIRLS! Emergency meeting!"

The tone in her voice had Yuri and Natsuki pause what they were doing and moved to the other girls. Yuri held the granny smith apple

she was to chop in her hand as she looked at both in confusion. Natuski grabbed the note and showed it to her. The pink haired tsundere and the purple haired bookworm's eyebrows raised before both sampled the box.

"It's basic but what the fuck is this?" Natsuki asks.

"A basic bland bento box. Needs more salt" Yuri commented.

Natsuki sighed. "Monika's tits.."

"Hey!"

Waving her hand to the brunette to silence her, Natsuki commented. "Well when Ganesha said he'd install that patch it was to signal he had a script. Maybe.." she looked at both women. "He's not Looping?" And with Sayori and Monika's confirmation, Natsuki shrugged. "Maybe he realized with this patch he's a dick. Maybe not. He could be the same asshole next loop. Sayori are you...YURI WHAT THE HELL?" as Yuri spit out the apple, after biting it and making a face.

Yuri wanted to taste the apple while they were discussing this. The woman was going to give her insight on Kevin's attempt to evolve before she took a bite of the apple and spat it out, the bitter taste affecting her tastebuds. And in that moment, Yuri realized something incredible about herself: She absolutely could not stand the taste of apples.

32.6 — Categories for Sci-fi, by Awesomedude17

Monika put the finishing touches to her chart and hung it up for the rest of the club to see.

"So, you may be wondering-"

"No we're not." Natsuki interrupted.

"Okay then. So, here's a sci-fi chart of evil corporations, their subtypes, their motivations, and the subtypes for those."

"Where'd you get the idea?"

"Deadpool and Spider-Man for the better part of 2 years makes you want to learn stuff."

"Right so... random pick... Doom."

"Which one?"

Natsuki shrugged. "The new one."

"Evil corporation subcategory 9: Weyland-Yutani type with motivation subcategory 12: energy crisis."

"Well, you better get on showing off Cerberus than."

"Naturally. Might throw in a taco cart in there for good measure."

32.7 — "Thank You and Celebrate/Thank You and Grow", by Venku

In all honesty, Yuri was not even remotely sure how to process this loop. Even with their Admin announcing that a patch to give Hiroaka, apparently called Kevin this Loop, a consciousness, she didn't expect to see any sort of response immediately. Hell, she'd accept a few hundred loops before something happened. Mysterious ways and whatnot.

Instead, after a fused loop in a series which made her baseline seem tame, she discovered that 'He' showed signs of something other than what was referenced as a basic walking hormone. That surprised her.

Yes, her fight with Natsuki was their attempt to blow off steam both had built up. Happy that Sayori had 'nudged' them into percussive

therapy to get them to talk, Yuri had woken up thinking that it would be the same loop. Same ennui.

Sayori's Ping and the resulting haiku and bento reflected otherwise.

It was an unspoken agreement after that meeting and her subsequent dislike of apples that they'd continue with the same policy of treating him like a human instead of furniture. By a bit of unspoken agreement, Monika and Yuri were the two who would see what else would show of this. Monika as Club President, anchor and the most familiar with the code. Yuri as both a vampire and Hunter of Hunters. Each able to see in one way or another any sort of deviances or changes.

Though it wasn't much, a few things were noticed. Sayori and Kevin were spending a lot of time gossiping. The *..don't sugarcoat your thoughts, Yuri* she chided to herself...the jackass actions of him from Baseline onward seemed to be dulled some. A few times he was going to make a rather insensitive remark, and he caught himself at the last minute. A subtle catch, but one that both Monika and Yuri noted.

Natsuki had reported during their second day that Kevin did seem to try to interact with the others more. Though it was obvious, according to her lover, that "The lumbering jackass" had no interest in her manga, he tried to at least get an opinion of why she loved the Parfait Girls. Monika even reported he was asking for honest critique of the 'word salad' he normally would offer.

It was a slightly hopeful outlook for this loop, but none of the girls were expecting this to carry over. Yggdrasil was notoriously buggy, and had its own version of what should and should not be.

The loop was ending, as the next day was the School Festival. Sayori had begged out early to allow for time with Kevin. Aware that he was non-looping but oddly happy her friend showed some signs this loop of being human, none of the other girls would begrudge her this chance.

Natsuki and Yuri were in her room, and Yuri moved some of the books aside. Tea was brewing as she always felt calm after a cup. Helped her relax. Natsuki was working on a doodle for an outfit she wanted to try to make later before looking at the purple haired vixen.

"Yuyu, I'm bored! Didn't you save any of the board games I brought in last time?"

"Well..." Yuri replied as she pulled out a box she picked up from a near hub loop. Immediately Natsuki rose out and explained: "No Yuri, we're not playing Cards against Humanity. You always win!"

She then paused. "I've been bitchy this loop haven't I?"

Yuri smiled before gently rubbing Natsuki's hair, causing the younger woman to grumble. "It's ok cutie. I find it endearing."

Tuning out Natsuki's tsundere remarks about being called 'cute', Yuri could only think of one quote from a hub book she and Sayori had read and discussed. *When Life is Well say* ***THANK YOU & CELEBRATE***

"Thank you" Yuri murmured, quietly to herself. She then proceeded to celebrate with her lover. Grateful for her, and for her 'family' in the Looping Literature Club.

The loop was ending and Sayori was not a happy camper.

Fully aware nothing was permanent save what loopers and anchors made permanent, as in skills or 'pocketed' items, Sayori was still grumbling a little bit when she knew that this version of Hiroaka might not carry over to the next loop. She was aware that Ganesha applied a patch which, if you use a botanist term, reattached the leaf to their branch of the tree. It wasn't clear if he would 'flower' into a looper, or had the stability to be grafted on other branches while the tree was being fixed.

While instinctively, and logically, she understood why Ganesha didn't show much attention to if he would or not, Sayori would not be honest if she didn't say that his reaction irritated her some. Even if it was a baseline code...even if they were not real..those were her memories of her friend, dammit! Monika refused interaction with anyone romantically, while Yuri and Natsuki found comfort in each other's arms. Why couldn't she have a chance? Even if it didn't work out, she'd like to try!

Calming herself, taking a deep breath, Sayori remembered what her Master had said. Her emotions were her own. That it was ok to feel them. How she responded to them determined what would happen next. And remembering how she wanted to spread 'happiness' and to quit focusing on her own problems.

"Peace is a lie, there is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power I gain victory. Through victory my chains are broken." Sayori repeated in her mind, reciting the Sith Code as a sort of meditative exercise. Reminding herself of what she swore on Equestria all those loops ago. To spread happiness and focus on others. Channeling her feelings of bitterness into how to spend the most time with Kevin. Even if he wasn't looping, he deserved to have a good night since he asked to spend time together.

Though her eyes had tinged yellow, they started to seep back into the crystal blue they were. Just in time for Kevin's knock on the door. Smiling, radiating positive thoughts, she opened and grinned.

"Hey!"

"Sayori" Kevin smiled. They had agreed to go see a movie and pick up some supplies Natsuki needed for the School Festival tomorrow.

"It's good to see you!" she added with a grin. While he still had some of his old habits, she remembered what Monika and Yuri had stated. He was trying, in some ways, to curtail his old actions. Stepping

forward on a bit of trust, she chose tonight to spend the last night of this loop with her friend. To have fun.

Fun they did have, though Kevin seemed more and more reserved on some aspects. When she'd act like a klutz, she saw where he wanted to say 'dummy' and it wasn't as affectionate as before. Other times, she thought she'd see some signs of irritation, but he didn't act on it. Wasn't enough to totally derail their time, but was enough for her to notice. She paused as they were walking back to her house. "Kevin?"

"Yes, Sayori?"

"I have the answer for you. From your poem."

He turned to face her, surprised for a moment. She refused to answer his question when he first asked. None of the other girls did either, making it 'clear' that it had to come from Sayori. "Oh?"

"You..were a bad friend. Growing up. You hurt my feelings. But.." she smiled at him as she reached out to squeeze his hand. "But now? With what I've seen? You have the potential to no longer be a bad friend. Promise me one thing?" she asked.

"What's that?"

"Remember why you wanted to change. And let that be the reason you do."

He was dumbfounded as what she said seemed to have given him food for thought. Giving him a friendly hug before going into the house for the night, and the end of the loop, Sayori internally signed. This could be a waste of time. Pointless. And yet this could be one memory Sayori could treasure for however long the loops last. She entered her house.

Recalling a quote she and Yuri had read in that hub book, Sayori paused as she looked around her room. *and when life is Bitter say*

THANK YOU & GROW.

Renewing her resolve to grow, and hoping she could have more memories like tonight, she whispered a silent "Thank you" as she reflected on what she was grateful for. Her friends from the Loops. Her Master. Her family in the Looping Literature Club.

For Hiroaka and Ganesha, who had given their branch the patch for him to be more than just a faceless collection of code.

32.8 — Dark and Toned, by CrazyCog

Some loops for the Dokies were emotion filled journeys that led to revelations about them and the world around them. They made each individual question their place in the wider looping multiverse, having caused Monika to angst, Sayori to cry, Yuri to do Yuri things, and Natsuki to complain that she was just along for the ride. This was not one of these loops. This was a loop of posing, super expressive faces, weird sentences, and protein being a miracle food for some reason.

Monika looked at Sayori, face muscles flexing in a super defined manner. "I'm sorry Sayori, but all of the protein this loop shall be mine, how else can I keep my super expressive face muscles this toned." Although the lights had shut off as soon as she had walked into the warehouse, there was still enough light from the full moon shining in through the windows for them to clearly see each other.

Sayori pointed at Monika while twisting in a weird way, her arm muscles bulging. "Are you kidding Monika? I need the protein this loop in order to hold all of these poses as long as I do." She bent forward and struck an over the top questioning pose. "By the way, what happened to the lights? I ask as I am not the one who did that which happened."

There was hysterical laughter from above them. There on the catwalk was Yuri, arms outstretched and the rest of her looking like she was doing the limbo. "Hahahahahaha, you two are fools. Unlike

you, I can see in the darkness, and thus have an advantage, which means that all of the protein shall be mine!"

Before she could follow through with her thread however, she was then dropkicked in the face by Natsuki wearing a dark outfit complete with a hat that somehow seemed to transition into hair despite the two being different colours. She landed on the same catwalk and slightly tilted the brim of said hat with two fingers. An otamatone cover of some generic anime song started playing in the background as Natsuki spoke, "Yare Yare Yuri, you went to so much trouble for your plan, only for it to fail." She pushed the hat back to the way it originally was. "All of the protein has already been taken by me and gone into my stando, Star Proteinum." A figure resembling Terry Crews appeared behind her as she placed her hands in her pockets and leaned back in a way that would probably hurt her had this not been an anime-esque loop. "Now, it is time for this to be the end!"

"POWER!"

With that cry, Star Proteinum launched forward at Yuri while bouncing his biceps, two which the girl gave a resounding cry back of "TREEEEEEEEEEE" as she launched forward in full vampire mode. Down below, Monika's face muscles were somehow countering Sayori's punches, each done in an over the top pose. It was pure and utter madness, and the girls would not have it any other way.

32.9 — Bull's...Monika's...Chargers?, by Venku

(DDLC)/(Dragon Age)

Natsuki Awoke. Two simple words. Enough to indicate that the shortest Doki was aware of what was going on. The loop memories kicked in, and she internally grimaced. Great. Start of what may appear to be another baseline loop. Although she wanted to complain, Natsuki kept her thoughts to herself. Just her luck, the tree would decide she needed pun loops. Those were quite horrible!

Figuring that her day needed to start, and to get this loop over with, she gathered her supplies. Backpack. Outfit. The box of kitty cupcakes. Satisfied she was set for the day, she made sure she could activate her pocket. Satisfied she could, she sent out a Ping, expecting three others to greet her. Instead of three Pings, five greeted her inquiry. Confused, she sent out another Ping to clarify. Another five responded. "Weird. Must be a fused loop" she muttered.

Walking into the clubroom, she called out "Y'know, I'm feeling quite loopy. Prez, you happen to be awake by any chance?"

"Actually no. And wouldn't you know it, I don't have the poultice to help out. Though I've been having that waking feeling" a crisp, cultured voice called out from the closet. Natsuki stopped, trying to get a visual clue of their looper. Unfortunately, she was in the middle of the door, and Yuri and Sayori ran into her.

"Owie! My Head!"

"While this is lovely, why did you stop?"

She quickly moved out of the way to allow the other two women to enter the room. This allowed her to see both visitors. One was dressed in Hiroaka's school outfit, though it seemed to be rather 'tight' on the humanoid. With a broad chest, and clearly defined muscles, it was quite obvious the man worked out. He was also a shade taller than her friend, had a black eyepatch on, and had two horns on his head. Noticing her staring, he winked. "Hey there short stuff. Normally I'd ask you if you want to see if everything lives up to your fantasy but I'm kind of in a committed relationship."

"I AM NOT...!" Natsuki's rebuttal was cut short as Sayori sighed, and Force Grabbed the back of the smaller woman's blazer. Sayori admonished the other woman with whispered "Hush Natsuki. Not now!"

While this was going on, the other man groaned. "Amatus. Really? We're in their loop and you just HAD to make that remark..." While

he chided the first man, the Dokis could get a visual look at the bearer of the 'cultured' voice. Dressed in a three piece stylish suit, his skin had a light bronze hue to it. Coal black hair was coiffed, while a thin mustache covered his upper lip. He was dressed in a three piece suit and attempted to give off an air of authority.

Noticing the attention given to him, the man appeared to visibly preen. Addressing Yuri, he commented "My apologies my dear lady, and that is a lovely shade of color four your hair. My companion here" and the other man was given a mock glower. "Is not usually this much of a foul mouthed lummox."

That caused the other woman to giggle as she bowed her head. "It seems you have a similar relationship with your.."

"Amatus. It's a term of endearment in my native tongue. Used for those we're romantically involved with. Dorian Pavus, dear lady. And this.." he smacked the shoulder of the other man who just laughed. "Is the Iron Bull. We are indeed travelling loopers. Are you the anchor of..?"

"Doki Doki Literature Club" Yuri responded. The wince given by both gentlemen was quite visible as she sighed. "Played our game did you?"

"Hub Loop" the other man commented as his one eye glanced first to Yuri, then Natsuki and finally Sayori. While not as obvious, this action was mirrored by the other man.

This action was noticed by Sayori who sighed and spoke. "We're not as bad as our baseline game. We promise. The taller one's Yuri. The one the Iron Bull patted on the butt with his statement.."

"Knocked on my butt Sayori.." Natsuki muttered.

"I said that!" Natsuki groaned while Yuri began to visibly rummage through a nearby closet. Ignoring her companion's responses, Sayori

pressed on. "That's our resident baker and Yuri's meeter.." as she waved her hand to Natsuki.

"Amatus" Dorian corrected.

"Yes..Natsuki's Meeter."

Dorian shook his head, refusing to correct the woman's words.

"And I'm Sayori, the VP of the Literature Club. Our anchor Monika is running late."

"W-would you like some tea?" Yuri asked as she opened up the closet. She saw that both visiting men were looking at Sayori as if they were both confused and had a bit of a pounding headache, so she sought to move the situation onward.

"Nothing stronger?" the Iron Bull asked.

"Not right now, no"

"Tea's fine."

"..so let me get this right. You four are the Looping Literature Club." Dorian responded as they sat in a semi circle at one of the tables. While the tea was brewing, Monika had shown up, completing the list of those awake this loop. Each of them had a cup of special green tea and peppermint blend, and one of Natsuki's cupcakes.

"That's right," Monika responded. "And usually we're up front about our baseline for visiting loopers."

"Wise of you" the Iron Bull murmured.

Acknowledging his statement with a small nod of her head, Monika continued. "We've worked through our baseline. And have managed to work into a cohesive family. You" she nodded her head to Iron Bull. "looped in and took the place of the protagonist. Yes it's a cheesy dating simulator. We're not amused with it. And no, he's not

looping. Our admin had installed a patch to give him personality but nothing else had happened."

"Whether or not he loops, I hope you all are treating him as a part of the family?" the Iron Bull asked. Various expressions of a painful memory or a nod of their head was his answer. "Good. I can tell you that in baseline as I'm in charge of a mercenary company the quickest way to kill any sort of chance for a new person to acclimatize is to treat them as an outsider."

Dorian paused. "Amatus" he chimed in. "A moment. Have any of you heard of our branch?" he asked the four. Seeing their confused response, Dorian sighed.

"Let me..tell you. Since we know of yours, it's only fair you know ours..."

"That's fucked up, you know"

Wincing at Natsuki's tone, Yuri chimed in. "While less eloquently put, she does have a point. Though.." she taps her chin. "We each have done and seen things we're not proud of. And it's only due to the loops we've moved past it. Can we agree to that point?" she asked. Her companions's responses were something that she could guess on. When the two visitors agreed, she smiled and took a sip of her tea.

"So we each have our own stories. And we're mature enough to move past it" the Iron Bull boomed. "Great! Now what are we going to do for this loop since we've all shown our collective horns?" He paused for a moment to dip into his Pocket. pulling out a few bottled beverages." And fuck this schoolage stuff! If we want a drink, we will"

A groan escaped Dorian's lips. "Please tell me you're not pulling out bottles of Marass-lok" he asked.

"Nah! We don't know them yet. It's the aggregio bottles you love, kadan."

Yuri paused. "Kadan?"

"Language of my people. Means literally heart's desire. Reflects a close friend or in this case soul mate." the Iron Bull responded. There was a collective aww as Dorian looked embarrassed.

Clearing her throat, Monika commented. "Well, as Anchor.." she paused. "I'd say we would do poetry or discuss literature. But as you guys know about our game..." Dorian's eyes lit up at the discussion of literature and he began to rummage through his Pocket while the Iron Bull's eyes glazed over. "Let's just call this a vacation loop. Get to know each other. We can discuss literature. There's a separate room if people want to spar, as well."

"Hey! I like that! Work the brain and work the mind." the Iron Bull visibly perked with Monika's response.

This caused Dorian to groan. "Can't take the dirty mercenary act out of you, can I, Amatus?"

"Ah you like the smell"

A small smirk escaped Sayori's lips as Dorian and Iron Bull bickered. While she'd miss having her friend here, this looked to be an interesting loop, something she would enjoy.

32.10 — So We Back in the Club, by Zum1UDontNo

"Hey, girls, I just wanted to give a warning about our MC this loop," Sayori said, popping her head through the hole.

"...And you couldn't have come through anywhere else?" Natsuki asked. Behind her, Monika looked up from her laptop.

Sayori shrugged as best she could. "Just wanted to keep you on your toes." She dropped through the missing tile in the ceiling, doing a brief handstand before flipping onto her feet. "So, you know how

his name is randomized now, but it tends to be something to do with 'M-C?'"

"His name isn't the only thing that's randomized," Monika reminded her. "His personality is also highly variable."

"The majority of the time he's basically the same, but okay. Point is, he's not just named Hiroaka now, his name is usually different. I wanted to warn you because... well, if I didn't, it might catch you off guard. And yeah, it'd have been funny to see your reactions, but..." She slowly trailed off.

Monika glanced at Natsuki. "She's regretting coming to warn us."

"Oh yeah," Natsuki responded. "Well, now we know something's up with his name."

"Aw man," Sayori pouted. "I didn't think this through." She shook her head. "Doesn't matter, I guess. I told him what the room's number is, so he'll be coming through any minute now."

Right on cue, the door opened, and the MC of that loop walked in. He looked around for a moment, before his face brightened as he saw Sayori.

Natsuki and Monika both surreptitiously looked down at the bottom of the screen to the text box... and winced.

"Hi, I'm Sayori's friend," Minecraft said. "Is this the Literature Club?"

Natsuki and Monika both looked to Sayori, who shrugged again. "Told you it'd catch you off guard."

32.11 — To Common Ground, by Venku

(DDLC)/(Dragon Age)/(MLP)

This was, as far as Natsuki was concerned, an interesting loop.

With the arrival of the Iron Bull replacing Hiroaka, and Dorian filling in as a teacher advisor for the Literature Club, Natsuki was unsure at first how to respond. The Iron Bull, while not as openly flirty as others she had the misfortune of meeting, still managed to make the smallest Doki uncomfortable with the innuendo from the start. Even as it was explained that the Bull always did that, it still didn't make Natsuki any less unnerved. While the loops did help settle most of the issues from her baseline, she was still a small bundle of tsundere who was uncomfortable with overt flirting.

After the Iron Bull explained that his flirting was an attempt to diffuse the situation and break the ice, Natsuki relaxed. A little bit. She was still nonplussed with how the man had managed to irritate her to that degree. In the spirit of cooperation, however, she was willing to let it slide. And share poetry.

Everyone present had taken some time to write something which 'spoke to their heart' as Monika had put it. During the required sharing moment, the Iron Bull went first. His poem was short and to the point. With a clear, slightly gravelly voice, he spoke:

" *Existence is a choice.*

There is no chaos in the world, only complexity.

Knowledge of the complex is wisdom.

From wisdom of the world comes wisdom of the self.

Mastery of the self is mastery of the world. Loss of the self is the source of suffering.

Suffering is a choice, and we can refuse it.

It is in our own power to create the world, or destroy it. "

Though Dorian appeared unmoved by the poem, the other four just blinked and said nothing for a few moments. Finally, as the leader of

the Looping Literature Club, Monika asked the most basic question. "What..does that mean?"

The Iron Bull shrugged his shoulders. "Recall I said that I am both Kossith by race and ex-Qunari by choice. The Qunari belief system was written by this sage Koslun in a text called the Tome of Koslun. And no" he replied as he looked at each of the women. "I don't have a copy of that text in my Pocket. The only one who does is the Warden, the original Anchor and they're refusing to budge on sharing that bit of information."

"It's theft caused a bit of a debacle in our baseline, so I can understand their stance, Amatus" Dorian chimed in. He waved his hand to the others. "Pardon the interruption, and I might just share that story later."

"Aww. Isn't he a big bundle of exposition?" the Iron Bull teased the other man, which caused Sayori to grin in a sappy manner and Yuri to issue a smirk. The Iron Bull ignored the other man's protests before he continued. "But to answer your question, this poem called the Body Canto basically states you make your world. It's your actions which shape it. Or that's my response to it anyway."

"Oh. I see" Monika replied. Thoughtful for a moment, she acted as if she wanted to dissect another point but instead nodded her head. "Well put. If we loop into your world I may ask your Anchor to get a glimpse of that book."

"Feel free" the Iron Bull replied. "Depending on which iteration he is for that branch, one of us might be even able to point out his special interest."

"Wait, what?" Yuri asked.

Interestingly, it was Sayori who chimed in. "I've heard of these loops," she mused. "It allows for multiple paths with the same goal in mind. Like you know how the book's going to start and end, but

you're not sure of the path taken. And each path creates another path."

"Very good young woman" Dorian responded. "The Warden has had the misfortune to live through each iteration from their baseline form. Man. Woman. Elf. Dwarf. Murdering psychopath to gentle healer. Two others in our world have had the same issue, Hawke and the Herald of Andraste. Most recently.." he nodded his head to the Iron Bull. "The Herald had the option to even be as a Kossith or a Tal-Vashoth. Those who rejected the Qun."

"Hah. Those few times were fun. Once the Boss even looped in like me. A man on the front lines. The blood and guts and viscera flying everywhere. Was absolutely glorious!" the Iron Bull quipped. "Good catch Pinkie!" He was confused when the Looping Literature club winced. "What? I didn't fart on anything."

It was at that moment the door itself opened and a woman with bright pink curly hair, a cheerful pink top and pink ruffled skirt, and skin which was even more bright than her hair walked in. "Who called for me?"

"Pinkie?" Sayori asked, surprised only with her appearance in this loop.

"Pinkamena Diane Pie, Sillyori" the other woman replied. "Remember that's my name when I'm not a perfect Pony!" She grinned before approaching Sayori and giving her a tight hug. "Thought someone asked for me. Oooh! Two New Loopers?" she asked, seeing Bull and Dorian remain gobsmacked at her appearance. "Hi! Look me up when you're in Equestria. And what's this?" she asked, seeing a barrel by the Iron Bull. "I'll be sure to pay you back" as Pinkie grabbed the barrel and began to carry it with her.

"Young lady…" Dorian began.

"Bup bup. Look me up and I'll offer a good trade" before Pinkie walked out the door with a 'pop'.

"Did she just steal the Marass-lok? One of the stronger alcoholic blends?" the Iron Bull asked, dumbfounded.

Natsuki shrugged. "Eh. She's Pinkie Pie. You get used to her."

All four Dokis laughed at the sheer confusion on the visitors' faces.

After the brief appearance of Pinkie Pie in her human form, the rest of the loop continued almost the same as if per baseline. Though Monika tried to get the visitors to write poems, that idea was quickly tabled when Natsuki and the Iron Bull tried to outshine the other in the 'First Annual Most Lewd Limerick' competition. Yuri's face turned beet red while Sayori just looked confused. Natsuki privately thought the other woman knew what was being said but kept up the innocent act for the hell of it.

Instead, the loopers each branched into two separate groups. Monika, Yuri and Dorian were apparently in deep discussion about the Dragon Age branch and 'Magical Theory'. While Sayori could understand the general concepts, she had no wish to engage in such theoretical discussion. Instead she wandered over to where the Iron Bull and Natsuki were engaged in friendly banter while baking.

"No no. You pair the Aggregio with pork. The natural tartness will compliment the meal, especially if you have a salted meat dish" the Iron Bull was emphasizing this point with the sharp knife in his hand. He paused, looked at the knife, then resumed preparing the vegetables for their meal. "How's the bread coming along, short stuff?"

"Sure. If you want to see if a Looper can get a diabetic emergency or spew their lunch everywhere. That wine is too tart!" Natsuki retorted as she was working on a lump of dough, kneading it and adding flour. This would be a normal situation, as far as Sayori was concerned, save for the fact Natsuki thought she would cook better

in her Majin form. Indeed, while she worked the bread, her twin antennae turned a slab of beef into a mound of chocolate.. "Only Majin can handle the sweets as it's a baseline diet. I'm the only Majin in this group. And I'm not 'Short Stuff'" she barked, taking a swipe at the Iron Bull who dodged it with a laugh.

Seeing as the Iron Bull and Natsuki were handling the cooking without issue, Sayori went to her room to work on one of her cosplay costumes, content she didn't need to be sure neither side tried to hurt the other.

The loop was coming to an end. Monika, in homage to the visitors and with the blessing of the others, tweaked the code a little bit. Banners inside of their club room, instead of showing "Welcome to Literature Club" showed "Welcome Dorian and Iron Bull to the Looping Literature Club." Minor decorations were added, including changing the walls to reflect a castle setting and candle sconces. Desk tables reflecting a small banquet hall, and various trappings of a castle keep. "It's only for this one time to welcome them" Monika elaborated when Sayori questioned the extent. Her Vice President nodded her head once, listening to Yuri and Natsuki chime in their agreement.

Her decorations apparently had the desired effect, as both Dorian and the Iron Bull expressed their surprise and appreciation. While Dorian assisted with setting the table, much to Natsuki's chagrin, the Iron Bull disappeared into his pocket for a moment. He returned, with a couple more casks held against his shoulder.

"What..?" Natsuki asked.

"Well you all have the wine and Dorian brought the aggregio. I just thought we'd have some Marass-lok for those interested" Bull replied as he prepared the casks, adding a spigot to them.

Dorian sighed. "You would really serve.." he yelped, his question cut off as Natsuki shifted to her Majin form. "Young lady, what..?"

"It's supposed to be a powerful badass drink right?" Natsuki chirped, her voice a bit higher in this form. "So! Gimme! Gimme gimme Gimme! I'm a Magical Girl Warrior Badass!"

"Magical girl warrior?"

"Of course!" Natsuki replied. She approached the Iron Bull with a mug in hand. Pouring herself a healthy cup of the drink, she turned to Dorian. "Who else in here is wearing a panty-shot miniskirt and midriff-baring school uniform? Who else can turn anything into candy and eat said candy? I'm Natsuki! The Tsundere of the Looping Literature Club and a badass bitch!" she self proclaimed, slamming the beverage down in one gulp.

She then proceeded to turn from a healthy Majin pink to a bright green and passed out, much to the laughing delight of the Iron Bull.

"Oh her I like!"

The other Dokis sighed while they left Natsuki passed out. Sayori just mashed her fingers together and went "Ehehehe. Let's eat. She'll wake up on her own."

After a while, Natsuki did indeed wake up. Grumbling good naturedly, she joined the table, and the feast.

"Shame the loop's ending soon" Dorian commented as the meal had ended. Each of them had not left the table, instead choosing to just sit and gossip.

"Indeed. There's still a lot more that I'd like to discuss with you. However we usually go up to the day of the School Festival. That's about a week or so out, sometimes two, from the start.." Monika commented. A small nod of her head as she added. "Who knows. We might loop into your branch and pick this conversation back up."

"I'd like that," Dorian replied.

The Iron Bull clapped his hands together as he grinned. "And you have to come by to see me and the chargers!" he added. "Who knows. Do well as we might make you honorary chargers! Even you short st-OW!" the Iron Bull leaned forward in his chair and rubbed his knee, where Natsuki had kicked him. Both were sitting across from each other. She smirked and gave him a challenging glare.

"With that being said..I propose one last toast..if that's ok?" Yuri asked. She held her glass high and cleared her throat. "To Common Ground. The one thing that makes these loops less of a hell."

The others lifted their glasses and mugs and clinked theirs with hers.

"To Common Ground!"

32.12 — New Management, by Skaz Wolfman

(DDLC)/(Adminspace)

Psyche found an elephant in her office. More accurately, an elephant-headed *deva* . She blinked, and then did a quick bow. "Lord Ganesha, to what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of this visit?"

"I am on a bit of a time crunch, as per usual, so i shall be brief," he began. "Quite some time ago, a rather distressingly damaged branch was activated. it couldn't be given to just anyone, it had to be someone on hephaestus or saraswati's level. I was assigned the Branch, and I have done my best to patch up the worst of it. Now, it is stable enough that I can in good conscience turn it over to another admin, which will make my life ever so slightly less hectic."

"That sounds all well and good, but why me? I'm an OI…that is, I'm not very experienced…"

"Not at direct administration, no, but you are an expert with soul-coding, and I've heard that psychology is an interest of yours."

"…I may have dabbled, here and there," the woman whose name was literally *Psyche* admitted.

"Then this is a superlative Branch for you to cut your teeth on. Rather small and not particularly intricate, but still quite a fascinating riddle of bugs and glitches. Only four Loopers, very tight-knit group, all girls. One is a chronic depressive who seems to have wandered closer to manic-depressive as late. The Anchor is a veritable Gordian Knot of complexes and neuroses all on her own. She also doesn't particularly trust gods, either. My first thought was to approach Pandora, as they share the common ground of having been created to serve a function they came to greatly regret. She, however, said she'd rather not add another Branch to her workload just now, and recommended you. I understand you were born mortal, married into the divinity business?"

' *Well, it would have been nice of 'Dory to give me a little heads-up,'* Psyche thought sourly. "Yes, I'm an Ascended human." She put a finger to her chin. "Truth be told, I have considered requesting a Branch of my own to Admin…but I'm pretty comfortable where I am, providing support from below. Most of the Admins benefit from my work, you know."

"Yes, I have heard that you are a very supportive person, Miss Psyche–"

"Ahem. *Mrs.* Psyche. I *am* married, Lord Ganesha."

"My apologies. You have a very youthful complexion, even by immortal standards."

"Thank you, you're much too kind," she said genuinely.

"Yes, well. your compassionate nature also makes you a good fit for this branch. These girls have come a long way on their own, but they're still quite the troubled bunch. I've done what i could find the time to do, but speaking frankly, they deserve an admin who can afford them more one-on-one attention. I do care for them, of course,

and i have always considered myself a great altruist, but I don't think my idea of care is what they need."

' *Oh…Tartarus, he's playing my bleeding heart against me.'*

"Well…I could look at the Hub backup, at least, and see if it looks like something I can handle…if nothing else, it gives me a good reason to excuse myself from dinner at Mother's, tonight," said Psyche, rubbing her arm. She gave Ganesha a wan smile, "For a woman who has so much love for French culture, her attempts at French cuisine are…dodgy. I'll never forget the time Hestia dragged poor Marianne to one of Mother's dinners; poor girl looked like she was going to drag her guillotine out of the mothballs."

"Thank you for your consideration, at the very least, Lady Psyche. you'll find I have already left the relevant files on your terminal. and in the interest of a conversationally topical farewell, I shall wish you *au revoir* ."

The next day, after a solid sleepless night of repeated playthroughs of *Doki Doki Literature Club* and mad note-taking, Psyche all but barged into Ganesha's office, red around her eyes, and said, "I'll do it."

…

Sometime later, in the present loop:

"You're sweating, Madam President," said Sayori smugly.

"You've got me in a corner, I'll admit it," Monika replied. "But I'm not *quite* up a creek yet," she added as she moved her knight, taking Sayori's bishop.

"Wow, I had no idea Sayori was so good at chess," said the MC, whose name was 'Phil' this loop.

"She's only *really* good at playing Monika," Yuri observed. "They play all the time, so Sayori has a good handle on how Monika thinks. Not to brag or anything, but she's no match for me; even though we often play together, the inner workings of my mind remain enigmatic to her," said Yuri with a smile.

"Pssh, whatever you say Patrick," Natsuki snarked. "Four Austens say Veeps has Moni in checkmate in three moves."

"Tch. A Chaucer on Monika getting her in two moves," Yuri retorted, "And you're one to talk, you don't even play chess."

"Because chess is for nerds. Backgammon is a *real* game. You don't need skill to be a boss at chess, you just need to get in the other person's head, like you said." Natsuki leaned forward and glanced at 'Phil'. "You could be the chess grandmaster of the world, but Sayori could probably still lick *your* ass in four moves, or less," she said with a smirk.

"…you mean 'kick' my ass, right?" asked Phil, his eye twitching. It was only day three of the loop, but he was already inured to Natsuki's potty mouth.

"Isn't that what I said?" she asked innocently, doe-eyed and everything.

"Hey, that's Sayori's bit," Yuri admonished.

"Checkmate~" sang Monika with a dopey grin as she set down her rook, sealing the fate of Sayori's king. Sayori melodramatically clutched at her chest and fell out of her chair.

"Dagnabbit," Natsuki grumbled as she reached a hand into her blazer and pulled four Jane Austen autographs out of her Pocket and handed them to Yuri.

Before Phil could ask them what they had just exchanged, there was a knock at the door. The girls all froze, and slowly turned as one to

stare at the door. Phil merely raised an eyebrow.

"That's…unprecedented," Monika muttered. She stood up and waved a hand, opening a computer screen in midair. She ignored their MC's flabbergasted reaction, frowning at the readout. "There's nothing anomalous in the code. No one Ping back," she said quietly before launching her own Ping.

No response. A moment later, there was another tentative knock at the door.

"Welp, this looks like a job for the Club's Face," said Sayori as she approached the door. Everyone but Phil noticed the black cylinder of a lightsaber hilt appearing in one of her hands. Sayori opened the door, revealing a butterfly-winged fairy woman in a business suit, with her shimmering white hair in a very professional bun and a briefcase in her hands. She was also, like, *uncomfortably* pretty. Sayori stared blankly at her for a solid minute, while the beautiful stranger stared right back, trying not to look nervous. Finally, Sayori declared, "Alright, maybe I'm not as straight as I've always thought. Admin?"

Psyche nodded quickly.

"Monika! I think Big G's replacement is here," said Sayori, turning away from the door and heading back into the clubroom. Psyche tentatively followed her.

"Let me guess, Ganesha was too busy to come?" asked Monika, arms folded in her seat. She snapped her fingers, and a long table materialized with her at the head, another chair at the other end, and two chairs on each of the sides in-between. Phil abruptly found himself in the seat next to Sayori, who had seemingly teleported into the seat at Monika's right hand. Yuri and Natsuki took their seats across from Sayori and him, respectively. Psyche sat down in the remaining chair.

"What the hell?!" Phil blurted.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention; our world is a video game," Sayori told him. " *Please* don't ask me what kind, it's sort of embarrassing. And Monika's kind of godlike. And this pretty fairy lady is *actually* a goddess. Right?" she turned to Psyche for confirmation.

Psyche nodded. "Hello, girls. Ladies? I'm Psyche. As Lord Ganesha told you before, I'm to be your new Administrator going forward. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintances."

"Not going to introduce yourself as the goddess of such and such?" Monika asked with an elevated eyebrow.

" *Lord* Ganesha?" asked Natsuki, "He seemed more easy-going than that, to me."

"No, seriously, *what the hell* ?" Phil pressed.

Sayori sighed before standing up and grabbing his hand, pulling him to his feet. "C'mon, Philly, I'll fill you in somewhere private. Yuri, take minutes for me, please?"

Yuri nodded, and Unpocketed a journal full of blank vellum pages, an inkwell, and a black feather quill. She resolved herself to record everything said and done, every expression, gesticulation, and reaction, with language so vivid and evocative that when Sayori read it she would feel as if she had stayed in the room the whole time.

"Ganesha is a much older deity than I am, and I learned the hard way a long time ago that you should always treat such people respectfully, however 'easy-going' they may seem," Psyche explained. "And I'm actually not a goddess *of* anything, really. Just Cupid's wife."

"Cupid?" asked Monika, "I thought the Olympian Admins favored their Greek names?"

"Most do, but my husband is an exception. When we started working more closely with the other pantheons after...The Incident...a lot of

other Admins got him confused with the *older* Eros. The Primordial one. So he's taken to using his Roman name more lately."

"So you're here, you've met us, what now?" asked Natsuki with a smidge of impatience. The more she looked at this impossibly perfect-looking woman, the more uncomfortable she felt, especially with her girlfriend in the room. And she noticed that Yuri was making more of an effort than she usually needed to to keep her eyes on her writing. "Like, do you have questions for us, or some kind of 'new management' mission statement, or what?"

"I...um...uhhhh, actually, I didn't really...plan that far ahead," Psyche admitted. "I just...figured I should introduce myself. I'm going to be responsible for you girls, after all, so it wouldn't do for us to be strangers, would it?"

"What other Branches are you responsible for?" asked Monika.

"Ahhh...none, actually," Psyche replied candidly. "Before Lord Ganesha approached me, I was doing general codework for the others. I helped with a lot of Patches, and especially with the Pocket. Nothing groundbreaking, really, just routine gruntwork for the most part."

"Huh," Natsuki said in a faint tone of frank surprise. "Everything I've heard about the Admins had me thinking the Olympians were all cocky cocks swinging their egos at each other."

" *Thank you* for that vivid imagery, Natsuki," said Monika sourly.

"Imagery is my specialty!" Natsuki beamed proudly.

Psyche cleared her throat, pulling everyone's attention back to her. "Ganesha made a point of how he regretted not having more time for you. Really, I just want you to know that I'll do my best to look out for you girls."

Monika shrugged at that. "We're kind of past needing to be 'looked out for', no offense."

Psyche looked Monika straight in the eyes and gave her a small smile. The subtle, understanding sadness in her eyes (combined with the simply impossible perfection of her features) gave Monika a funny feeling. Some mixture of cold shame at her own dismissive attitude and a gush of warmth in her chest. "No one should ever feel like they're 'past' letting those who have the power to protect them do so. Remember, I was once a mortal human. I've never let myself forget that. I've never forgotten, either, what it was like being at the mercy of fickle divinities. There's a lot of lingering pain in all four of you, I can feel it. I want to do what I can to help ease it."

Monika heard a whisper in her mind, ' *I also know, very, very well, what it means to suffer and bleed for the right to love. As a matter of fact, before I Ascended, Love Herself was my most bitter enemy in my pursuit of love.'*

' *I also know, very, very, well how it feels to be a misunderstood outsider,'* Yuri heard Psyche whisper in her mind, ' *Even to this day, there are times when my beloved, who has always been an immortal, can't quite grasp my human sensibilities and can only do his best to humor me.'*

To Natsuki, Psyche mind-whispered, ' *I also know, very, very, well how it feels to have everyone look down on you, and not take you seriously. And I know how it feels to be so in love with someone I can barely understand.'*

And in another room entirely, Psyche whispered to Sayori, ' *I want you to know, regardless of how you feel sometimes, you are an exceptional person. Based on what I've learned, I have to believe that you are the sole reason that your friends are as stable and grounded as they are. To forgive what you have forgiven, to care for those you have cared for, and to dare to hope for what you hope for, all while dragging the albatross you have around your neck...I cannot*

overstate my admiration of your human spirit, Sayori. I hope I can prove worthy to have you and your friends in my charge.'

"Well, before I keep going—any questions?" Psyche asked. As it turned out, Loopers meeting someone new for the first time, especially their brand new Admin, had a *lot* of questions.

Compiler's Commentary:

32.1: *[Footnote]*

32.2: The crucial role Sayori plays in keeping her friends balanced and happy can never be overstated enough.

32.3: *Choo-choos into eternity*

32.4: *zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz*

32.5: INTROSPECTION! *Spooky noises*

32.6: You can tell Monika's getting stir crazy when she starts making organizational graphs and tables that have little practical application. Come to think of it, she might have picked up the habit from her sessions with Twilight Sparkle?

32.7: OH! I almost forgot, welcome to the Looping Literature Club, Venku! Here's your cupcake.

32.8: I would yare yare at all this nonsense, but I guess Natsuki beat me to it.

32.9: New friends! Can't ever have enough new friends.

32.10: The girls would later wonder how he got his hands on a diamond pickaxe, as none of them had coded it in.

32.11: Before anyone freaks out about Pinkie jumping Loops or something just for a Kramer Gag, no. She was somewhere in the

background of this loop the entire time, probably tooling around in meatspace, working at a bakery and catering parties or some such. How did she pop into the game for the Kramer Gag, if that's the cae, you ask? She's frigging Pinkie Pie, that's how.

32.12: WHAT'S THIS?! A *TWELFTH* SNIP, IN *MY* CHAPTER?! It's actually more likely than you might think. The odd number of snips up until now was actually a serious annoyance to me for the last thirty chapters (excluding the Special Chapters where that didn't apply) but I kept it up because it was the precedent Keluvax had set with her DDLC Loops Compilation, so I felt somehow obligated to carry on because...I don't know, I'm weird, leave me alone. But this chapter begins a new era in the looping lives and times of the Literature Club! The old Admin, Ganesha, who also administrates the *Neon Genesis Evangelion, Magic: the Gathering,* and *Homestuck* Loops, among others, has handed our girls over to a younger Admin with a tentatively optimistic disposition and a much less fusterclucked schedule. This is symbolic of the new paradigm shift for the DDLC Loops, and also due to the fact that I've been avoiding writing interactions between the girls and their Admin due to his **VERY PARTICUlAR VERBAL QUIRK** . So, yeah, twelve snips to a standard chapter from now on, and a freshfaced new Admin. Woohoo. Let the good times roll.

Chapter 33

33.1 - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. On the screen was a picture of a wireframe bowl of sticks. The words 'when you're here, you're here' covered the bottom half of the image.

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.2 - "Music is Literature!" by Venku

"Excuse me?" Monika asked. In all her time ever since she started Looping, she was unsure if she had ever heard what she thought she did.

"You heard me. This is the literature club. Yet you're not hosting review on one of the oldest forms of literature: Songs. Music" MC repeated. This loop had him named Makoto Inoue. Sayori, as per loop standards, had introduced him to the Literature Club. Remembering that his personality had started to change due to what Ganesha had mentioned, each of the Doki Doki Literature Loopers were aware, when Awake, that they would be dealing with a man who was more than just the listless bundle of codes he was Baseline. Someone with a bit of a personality.

She just didn't expect him to approach her after the end of the club meeting and chastise her for focusing only on poetry!

"Fine" she blurted. If she sounded exasperated, she would apologize to him later. She turned a small smile to Makoto for a moment before flashing a bit of a grin. "Look. I get what you're saying, and you're right. However poetry itself can be used in music. Rappers such as Ai, Ken the 390 and others have to make their verses rhyme, right?" With his head nodding in agreement, Monika pressed on. "Let's work on the poetry and later, once I'm certain everyone is ok with it, we can see if the others are ok with a brief history of music and literature."

Makoto's mood lightened for a moment before Monika added "That means though you'll have to suffer through other music than what you normally prefer. AND" she added, seeing him act crestfallen for a moment. "If we're going to acquiesce to your review on music, we're going to open it up to others discussions as well. If Natsuki wants to review Manga or Yuri horror, I expect full participation from you as well. Are we clear?"

"Yes Senpai" Makoto commented, offering a respectful bow. Monika noted that his mood was only a little bit lighter than normal. "Please let Sayori-chan know I'll be outside when she's done?"

"I will."

As Makoto left, Monika let loose a small sign before calling out. "Veep. What the hell was that?"

Sayori, who was entertaining herself by drawing a kitten picture on the chalkboard, approached. "I honestly don't know. All I know is when this Loop began, besides you, Yuri and Natsuki pinging, Makoto" and she paused to be sure to use his right name for this loop. "Just wouldn't shut up about music. While I'm grateful he's more than just code…"

"We're still slowly having to get used to him having something other than being a walking hormone as per Baseline." Monika finished for her. She sighed for a moment before a small nod. "Do let Yuri and Natsuki know of this when you can please?" she asks. "I'm planning

on brushing up on my understanding of music. Maybe I could see if I had saved some Greek tragedies in my Pocket."

Sayori nodded her head as she walked out to meet Makoto.

"And Sayori?"

"Yeah."

"Add that the others leave their ear plugs behind."

Sayori groaned. "Of course this version of him would have him like music, while sounding like a cat with its tail stepped on " she groaned as she walked out to meet Makoto.

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. On the screen was a picture of a cartoon lumberjack, holding his head in his hands. A tree had been chopped down, and was tearing into the background, revealing a wall of static behind it. A speech bubble connected to the lumberjack saying 'dear lord what have I done.'

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.3 - A Chocolate Attack, by Venku

It was a perfectly ordinary day at the literature club, aside from the excavator Sayori had crashed through the floor.

The excavator was your typical standard model. Bright yellow coloring with stenciled ownership on the side. Hydraulic crane being

balanced by a cab with controls in the middle. Exterior was pristine, and it looked fresh off the model.

The only thing which might have made this excavator stand out was the pink haired driver wearing a schoolgirl seifuku and a bright red bow laughing like a maniac.

"Ahhahaahahh! I'm going to get to the chocolate fountain buried under the school! I smell it! It smells so good!" Sayori exclaimed as she operated the machine. Her mind was set on one goal. Sweet, delicious chocolate!

What were the others doing while Sayori was in the middle of her interior redecoration?

MC, named Motoki Chano this Loop iteration, was currently being consoled by Natsuki of all people. As per her standard at the start of the loop, she had sent out a Ping and received three back. They both had entered the Club in deep gossip about the most recent Dragon Ball Super Manga Arc. Natsuki had to admit that this go round, the mass of binary code could hold a conversation. She personally felt that he was a bit airheaded and prone to flights of fancy, but she could relate to this version of MC.

When Sayori started her digging spree, Motoki began to shout. "WHAT? HOW? SAYORI DAMN IT!" he bit his tongue. "I HATE SAYING THIS BUT DUM-" he couldn't finish the rest out as Natsuki elbowed him in the stomach and dragged him out.

"It's not worth it dummy. Sayori appears to have cracked due to exam pressure" Natsuki hissed, forcing him to pay attention to her. "Come on. Let's go to the school nurse and see if there's someone who could help."

Leading MC away, Natsuki bypassed Monika and Yuri who had heard the shouting. Yuri, sensing something was up, distracted MC with a conversation about the Manga version of a series she hoped

would not loop, Natsuki exchanged a few hissed words with Monika who just nodded.

"Yuri. Come with me please" the Club President asked. As Natsuki led MC onward, Yuri fell in step as Monika led the way to the club room. When they were well enough away, Yuri cleared her throat. "If you're about to ask if this is a fused loop, I don't know." Satisfied with Monika's answer, Yuri kept her mouth shut as they rushed to the club room.

Entering, they were treated to a unique sight. A dark liquid fountain erupted from the middle of the room where the excavator was parked. The smell of chocolate came from the liquid, and Sayori was humming to herself while drinking a glass of chocolate milk.

Though her back was to the others, Sayori turned around to face them with a small smile on her face and a chirp. "Hi" she replied. A small wave of her hand to the fountain as she asked. "Bet you would like to know what happened" she added.

"Would be nice" Yuri quipped.

"See. A few loops ago I looped into the Adventure Time Loop. Y'know with Princess Bubblegum?" As both of the other women nodded their heads in understanding, "And y'know how the Princess could alter her biomass with candy?"

"You're not a Majin though" Yuri pointed out.

"I get that! I do" Sayori explained. "But I can still 'smell' it. I think it's due to where I was connected to all the candy everywhere. And when I walked into the room, the lovely smell of chocolate hit my nose" Sayori explained.

"So you thought to 'get' the candy here. I get that but.." Monika sighed as she looked at Sayori. "You know MC is more responsive. And he might have had an issue with seeing you destroy the club room."

"Ehehhheh..." Sayori remarked. "Ehh. I forgot about that."

Monika sighed as Natsuki entered the room. "Alright fuckers" the smallest Doki called out. "Someone wanna tell me what the hell that monstrosity is about?" she asked, pointing to the fountain.

"Sayori looped as Bubblegum and could 'smell the chocolate'" Yuri explained. "And the Tree being the Tree there is a big fountain of chocolate."

"Figures" Natsuki replied. "And while it's good for you, your body can't rapidly process it" as Natsuki transformed into her Majin form. "Like I can."

"Well yeah. So it just begs the question.." Sayori paused before rummaging through her pocket. A few tubs of ice cream and milk were pulled out with four spoons.

"Wanna join me?"

Natsuki was the first in line.

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. It was the number 69, on a black background in black text.

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.4 - Horror Discourse, by Venku

"What do you mean what types of horror am I interested in?" Yuri asked.

Yuri had woken up this loop and sent out a ping, receiving three in return. The loop started out as normal, when she arrived and Sayori introduced MC. Apparently this loop he was referred to as 'Majime Chino, please call me MC'. Everything seemed to be going ok until he asked her about horror.

"You heard me," MC responded. While thinking about how to respond, Yuri scanned the room. Natsuki and Sayori hadn't arrived yet while Monika was busy scribbling in her notebook. As she tapped the Portrait of Markov book, MC clarified. "Is that something with social experimentation? Psychological torture? Or something like the Biohazard games with flesh eating zombies." Overhearing their discussion, Monika briefly shuddered with the reference to zombies.

Yuri drummed her fingers on the spine of the book for a moment, lost in thought. "You know, that is a good question," she replied. "If I had to place any sort of classification on this book it'd be a mix of psychological and religious horror. You have references to the Third Eye but also of a government project kidnapping girls all in the name of a Roman Goddess of Burials."

"To be blunt" she added, after getting MC and herself a cup of tea. "Though horror is my preferred genre, it depends more on the mood I'm in when I look for a book. You have Dante's Divine Comedy which is almost a staple of religious horror especially in the Inferno. Philosophical horror would go more with Frankenstein or Clive Barker." She paused at MC's look of incredulity. "Don't give me that" she snapped. A mock accusatory finger was pointed at him. "Literature, especially horror, requires a person to be at least familiar with all genres."

"Fine fine! Fair point that" MC replied. Monika had briefly looked their way, and seeing no other rising issues, resumed her writing. "I'm honestly just surprised is all. While a good religious horror could send one into church, what's your take on the Lovecraftian mythos?"

Yuri briefly chuckled. While she personally had heard of Alucard scaring Cthulhu, she thought it was an inappropriate discussion for now. "It's an interesting concept. Ancient societies and of gods who could destroy everything if awakened. 'That is not dead which can eternal lie, and with strange aeons even death may die'," she quoted, in a mock serious tone.

This had the desired effect of making even Monika laugh. A brief smirk to both MC and Monika before Yuri finished. "As I said, it just depends on my mood. And you?"

"While I'm more driven to the post apocalyptic settings, your Dawn of the Dead and the like" MC began. "As it's familiar to some of the Manga and games I play, I just like series regardless which shows that in the end basic kindness and decency triumph. Your Stephen King, your 'The Crow'..and I'm aware of how the story ended" he added for clarity.

Yuri was going to ask another question before a loud THUMP was heard by the door. Their attention turned toward it, the other Literature Club members watched as Natsuki and Sayori entered.

Sayori had a small bruise on her head while Natsuki was holding onto the supplies and grumbling. "If you had watched where you were going instead of skipping down the hall…"

"My head hurts! Can we hold off talking about me running into a wall until we see if I look like a unicorn?" Sayori interrupted.

MC sighed. "Excuse me" he replied to Yuri before approaching Sayori. "What happened? Didn't I tell you to watch where you were going?" he teasingly chided. "Alright dummy" he replied in an affectionate tone. "Let's find you some ice."

As they disappeared, Yuri paused. *Interesting.* His discussion about his preference and how he treated Sayori had caused Yuri to examine him in a new light. Lost in thought, she hadn't realized she spoke aloud until Natsuki approached.

"What's interesting?" Natsuki asked.

"Oh ah. Heh. Just the discussion MC and I had before you came in, short stuff." Yuri quipped. A small smirk as Natsuki started her mock growling. "Help me put away the tea and I'll share his take on the horror genre."

Yuri smiled internally. *Shame this won't carry over but it's nice seeing the romantic, horror loving side of him*

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. It was an illustrated picture of Zeus pointing at the camera, with the caption ' **I want *you*** to stop crashing all these god damn loops do you know how much harder you're making my life.'

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.5 (12.5 con't.) - Into the Dream Part 2, by Black Omochao

"I feel like we might have taken a wrong turn somewhere…" Sayori muttered as she and Monika trudged through a snowy forest.

"Wrong turn? Sayori, we don't even know where we want to go," Monika pointed out with a small sigh.

"Well…yeah, but I'm sure we didn't want to end up covered in snow," Sayori shivered a bit.

Monika nodded in acknowledgement of her friend's concerns, glancing around the area for any signs of some exit from the snow…

"Hey, is that a person…?" Sayori questioned, pointing to the left from where Monika was looking.

"A person?" Monika blinked, looking to where Sayori was pointing, hoping it was perhaps Yuri or Natsuki, but one look of the shape in the distance, and she immediately knew it couldn't be; this person was far too small.

Despite the person not being either of their friends, the two Loopers decided to move closer to the strange person, standing out in this blizzard. As they continued to approach, more features became visible; the person was a very short girl, only about up to their knees in height. She had pale skin, long, dark-blue hair, and was wearing an icy blue kimono.

Despite the small size, it wasn't long before the two girls noticed the similarities in appearance to a certain creature from Japanese folklore.

"A yuki-onna…?" Sayori concluded once she and Monika had made it to the small snow woman. Sayori hunched down to the ghost-like girl's eye level, curiously.

The, supposed, yuki-onna just gave Sayori a blank stare in return.

Monika looked between the two for a moment, both the silence, and cold, setting in, before she gave a slight groan, "Um, excuse me? I don't mean to be rude, but; do you speak?"

At the question, the yuki-onna turned to look towards Monika, but said nothing.

Sayori didn't seem to mind the attention being taken off her, keeping interested eyes on the short humanoid.

Monika did her best to put on a friendly smile, "You don't have to speak, if you can't, or don't want to, but do you perhaps think you

can point us to a way out of the cold? We're… not as adept to it, as you are…"

More silence and staring followed this question…

After nearly thirty seconds of blank staring, Monika and Sayori both let out defeated sighs.

"W-We're sorry we bothered you," Sayori muttered unsurely.

"Yes…we'll find a way out of here, I'm sure," Monika assured, still doing her best to smile, despite the awkwardness.

The yuki-onna kept staring at Monika…before suddenly jumping towards her.

"Huh!?" Monika jumped back in shock at the sudden attack.

"Monika!?" Sayori called out in concern, looking ready to jump forward and fight off her friend's attacker; but it proved to be unnecessary, "Huh…?"

Monika blinked in confusion; one minute the yuki-onna had been jumping towards her, the next; it was gone, and she didn't feel cold anymore…

"M-Monika, is that you…?" Sayori questioned slowly, looking at her friend cautiously.

The Anchor gave the other girl a strange look, "What do you mean, Sayori? Of course, it's me, why wouldn't it…?" blinking, Monika took notice of her change of attire; her arm was covered by the long sleeves of an icy blue kimono, her hand was also much paler than her usual skin tone…

It didn't take Monika too long to realize that she had been transformed into a yuki-onna, "…What?"

"Yeah, that seems like the appropriate reaction," Sayori admitted, a sweatdrop forming on her head.

Meanwhile, in a world of darkness, the other two Dokis were having a…more *exciting* experience…

"Give it back! Give it back! GIVE IT BACK!"

"Yuri, just give her the knife!" Natsuki shouted as she and her friend ran from the rampaging girl.

" *Sure* , let me just turn around and *offer* it to her!" Yuri countered with a slightly sarcastic tone.

"GIVE IT BACK!" Madotsuki screamed, dark particles shooting after the two Loopers and attempting to strangle them.

"Is this really the time for sarcasm!?" Natsuki yelped.

"I'll try, but she doesn't seem very reasonable!" Yuri relented, against her better judgement, halting her running. She turned to face the charging Madotsuki.

" ***GIVE IT BACK!*** "

"Here," Yuri offered the knife.

Suddenly, to both Yuri and Natsuki's surprise, the dark tornado that seemed to have been enveloping the young girl dissipated, her enraged expression changing to a more neutral one as she took the knife from the taller girl's hand.

"…Mine," Madotsuki muttered as she stared at the knife, before opening what seemed to be a window in her shirt and placing it inside. "My friend…" she gave a soft smile as she put her hands to her chest.

"…Oookay," Natsuki gave a weirded-out look, before turning to Yuri. "I'll never call your interest in knives strange again."

Yuri gave the pink-haired girl a strange look, "…You called my interest in knives 'strange…?"'

Natsuki just sighed as she put a hand to her forehead, "Let's just change the subject, why don't we…?"

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. It was the first four notes of Megalovania on sheet music. A dog was t-posing in the background.

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.6 - Solo Una Incursión Demoníaca, by Awesomedude17

(DDLC)/(Doom)

"Draw four. Green," Yuri said.

"Oof," Sayori drew four cards before placing down a reverse card.

"Draw four. Blue."

"Are you kidding me? How many draw fours do you have there?" Natsuki said.

"I won't answer that."

"Ugh..." Natsuki drew four cards before placing down a wild card. "Yellow,"

"Oof," Sayori drew a card.

"Draw four. Blue."

"Really?"

A loud slam quickly drew the attention of the three as a very drunk Monika appeared in the room wielding a bloodied double barrel shotgun as a massive man in green armor followed her in with a squirming demon.

"Go to Heaven and tell the Devil I'm drunk!" Monika declared as she shot the demon into giblets right before cheering, vomiting and passing out, not necessarily in that order.

"My bad, ladies. Zombies with guns happened thanks to Hell, and I was around," Doomguy apologized before leaving.

Everyone went straight back to their game of Uno.

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. It showed Natsuki and Yuri sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.7 - Feeling Crabby, by Awesomedude17.

Monika looked at the bowl of egg salad, with some strange bits mixed in.

"Egg salad?"

"Crab salad." Natsuki replied. "Made It myself."

"Not having any."

"Relax, Monika. It's not real crab. It's imitation crab."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah," Natsuki took out a packet of crab sticks. "See. These are definitely not real crab legs."

"Alright then." Monika took out a spoon and tried the salad. "Hmm...Alright. Definitely fishy."

"What's fishy?" Yuri poked her head into the room.

"Natsuki's imitation crab salad. It's not bad."

"I thought you were a vegetarian. Isn't fake crab made of surimi, or does minced fish not count?"

Monika didn't take long to glare at Natsuki before grabbing the bowl and splattering the contents of it on Natsuki's head. As Monika quietly left, Yuri gave a forlogned look at Natsuki. "Was that on purpose?"

"Nnnnnnooo..." Natsuki replied.

Yuri sighed. When especially embarrassed, Natsuki was absolutely abysmal at lying.

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo and Wookywok

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

It was a picture of the planet Saturn, with muscular arms and legs hastily edited onto it. "Is your planet running?" It read at the top. "Well, you better go CATCH IT."

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.8 - **Wherein the Dokies Do Not ENJOY THEMSELVES, by Wookywok.**

Natsuki grumbled as she flopped down on the beanbag, the bright magenta checkerboard pattern shifting under her weight. "I've said it before and I'll say it again," she muttered into the seat. "I fucking hate running on older systems. Windows 95 just feels so sluggish compared to even Windows 7."

Sayori shrugged, tracing her hand against the bark of a poorly-rendered palm tree. "Meh. I don't care too much about that. It's the giant marble busts everywhere that are creeping me out."

All of a sudden, Yuri burst into the clubroom, a pair of pink mirrorshades on her face. "[illegible]," she yelled, in a voice nobody could quite pick out.

Meanwhile, in another room, not noticing nor noticed by her club members, Monika continued to listen to her vaporwave.

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo and Wookywok

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. On the screen was a painting of a large man with a writhing beard made of tentacles, flexing with a poorly edited dumbbell in his arms. The top had text that said "CTHULHU'S SECRET BODYBUILDING COUSIN." The bottom of the image was obscured by messy black scratches, with the name "Jordan" overlaying it.

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.9 - **Pizza Time, by Awesomedude17.**

(DDLC)/(Five Nights at Freddy's)

***"Freddy Fazbear's pizza** , in a revolutionary move, has cheese as an available topping! Come today to try it out!"*

"The cheese is so... real! *"*

"Ah crap, it's one of those Loops." Natsuki said as she bit into her pineapple, ham and sweet pepper pizza.

"Oh yeah. I remember you mentioning that place Nats. Actually, I was there myself. I think I burned it down getting too close to the oven." Sayori remarked after swallowing a bite of anchovy, pineapple and chorizo pizza.

"I think I burned it down one day too... or was it the awful 'horror' attraction?" Yuri said as she fanned herself with her hand, looking somewhat uncomfortable with the excess garlic in her everything possible pizza.

"You guys think we should visit tonight?" Monika asked after finishing her vegan cheese margherita pizza.

"We got nothing better to do." Natsuki shrugged.

"Alright. I kinda forgot this place was a thing." Yuri admitted.

Freddy and Co glared at the four, especially Yuri. Freddy held up a sign that said it all.

No. No. Fuck this. I still remember the last time you looped here!

"It was an accident!"

Freddy flipped the sign and it now read,

What do you call setting the pizzeria on fire?

"A really energetic stroll."

"We need to limit your collateral involving 'walks', effective immediately Yuri." Monika said.

"Well, thanks for not killing us." Sayori said with a nervous smile.

Don't think we forgot about you either, bow girl.

"I said I was sorry!"

Natsuki groaned. "This was a dumb idea for a different reason than I expected."

Foxy tapped something out in morse code.

"Monika, translation?"

"He says he still likes you, Nats."

"Thank you Foxy."

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. She recognized it as a cognitohazard from the SCP foundation. The colors spilled out of the phone, pouring into the floor and painting the tiles maroon. The windows shimmered, before sprouting wings and flying away. The nearby desks inverted on themselves, rippling and glistening with crescent-shaped raindrops. A heavy fog filled the room, bringing with it the faint smell of strawberries, before everything flashed. When Yuri cleared the spots from her vision, the phone was turned off, and the moon was shining through the window.

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.10 (33.5 con't.) - Into the Dream Part 3, by Black Omochao.

There were no sounds, save for the small group's footsteps, as Natsuki, Yuri, and their new 'companion,' continued through the pitch blank world…

"… So," Natsuki broke the silence, looking towards Madotsuki questioningly, "What's your story…?"

The younger girl very pointedly ignored the Looper's question, continuing to look straight forward as they walked.

"That is, *if* you're okay telling us," Natsuki was quick to add, giving a slightly uncomfortable cough, though this was only met with more silence.

" *Sooo* ," Yuri decided to speak of as well, giving a friendly smile, "You also like knives…?"

This comment had Madotsuki pause, but only to turn and glare at the tall girl, before giving a huff, and continuing to walk forward, at a slightly faster pace.

Natsuki and Yuri exchanged slightly concerned looks, before increasing their speed to match the other girl's.

"Stop following me!" Madotsuki finally spoke, glaring back at the other girls.

"We're not following you! We're just going in the same direction!" Natsuki reasoned, her eyes narrowing a bit.

Madotsuki let out a low snarl but kept walking.

Eventually the trio came to a strange pale gate, sitting there in the middle of the dark landscape. Without a second thought, the younger girl charged forward, disappearing into the gate.

"… So, do we keep following her?" Natsuki questioned, giving the other Doki a skeptical look.

Yuri shrugged, a pleasant smile on her face, "I do have some… suspicions about her, but we need the right opportunity to bring up the concept of time travel… so yes, I think we should keep following her," the taller girl nodded.

The pink haired Looper sighed, her posture slumping a bit, "Fine, not like we have any other source of direction right now…"

Trading another set of nods, the two Dokis walked forward, into the gate, and vanished from the Dark World.

"Okay, where are we now!?" Sayori questioned loudly, gesturing around at the surrounding environment; as she and Monika appeared to be on a pink island, surrounded by a sea of pink water.

"All we did was look in a puddle inside an igloo! How does that correlate to *this* !?"

"Well, this world obviously runs on its own sort of logic," Monika, still in the form of a yuki-onna, commented. The Anchor gave a small sigh, sitting down on the pink sand, and dangling her feet into the pink water, "At the least, I appreciate the break from that frigid land…" no sooner had she finish speaking, did the water around her feet start to frost over. Monika quickly pulled her feet from the water, before giving a groan, "Now, if only I could figure out how to turn back to normal…"

Sayori sent her friend a sympathetic look, before glancing around at the surroundings again, "I suppose it is a bit preferable to being caught in a blizzard, but I would still like to have some sort of direction…"

Monika hummed to herself, looking around, before she took notice of something in the distance; a much larger island, with some large, pyramid-like structures on it, "Well, I'm not sure if it actually means anything, but that looks like a good place to start…"

Stepping out of the pale colored gate, Yuri and Natsuki needed to shield their eyes, having just come a world of pure darkness, and now stepping into a bright, desert-like area, filled with a large amount of strange curly plants(?)

Walking a few steps onto the sand, the two Dokis confusedly glanced around.

"Well, this place seems… better," Yuri smiled a bit as she looked at the somewhat dreary, but brighter, scenery.

"But, we're no closer to finding Monika, Sayori, or what this Loop's about," Natsuki, in contrast to her friend, regarded their surroundings with suspicion. "Also, where'd that girl go…?"

Yuri looked around with a careful eye, hopping to spot the girl she suspected may have been Looping, before she spotted a humanoid figure a bit of a distance away, walking down an open path through the plants, "There! I think that's her!"

Natsuki grumbled a bit, but a bit of a smile came to her face quickly, "Alright, let's hurry after her, and maybe get to the bottom of some of this stuff!"

"Right!" Yuri nodded back to the shorter girl, before they went after Madotsuki.

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo and Wookywok

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

It was a video of a blank screen, with a cartoon gnome running around it. "I'm gnot a gnelf," it said. "I'm gnot a gnoblin!"

Suddenly, the voice was no longer coming from the phone, instead resounding throughout the entire Clubroom and through the girls' skulls. "I'm a gnome," it exclaimed, "And you've been..."

The clubroom walls began to shake. "GNOOOOOOOOMED!"

The yell continued to echo through the room for several minutes after, causing a confused Sayori to peek her head in from the door and quirk an eyebrow, before shaking her head and closing it again.

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.11 - In Which Monika Rants About an American Coffee Chain, by Awesomedude17.

"You know, I have ask just this once." Yuri said. "What's your opinion on Starbucks?"

"I get that people enjoy it but as a coffee lover, I must say I don't like it at all. They burn their coffee. They go beyond dark roast and it messes with my taste buds hard. Oh boy, the non-burnt coffee drinks there are also too sweet. They are just the kind of thing that Sayori and Natsuki would salivate to though, and that's why you'll probably see me there. At most, I'd get an expect-express-espresso." Monika sighed, and summoned a cup of coffee.

"I take it that this rant's not over?"

"Far from it, Yuri. I just needed some coffee. A special red eye blend, taught to me by someone who dislikes Phoenix Wright."

"I thought you liked Wright?"

"I do, but the man knew his coffee well. He prefers it black, but he knows other blends. Learned a lot from him. Shame he isn't Looping."

"Speaking of, how's Blackquill?"

"Well, he seemed a little relieved when I told him about you and Nats."

"Wait? Really?" Yuri almost jumped out of her seat.

"Yuri, you were so obviously crushing on him, even a love blind idiot would have figured it out instantly."

Yuri blushed hard.

"Anyway, where was I going? Oh yeah, Starbucks and oversaturation."

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. Natsuki waited until Yuri was watching, before pressing play. On the screen, Natsuki walked into the room and looked at the camera. She adjusted a pair of glasses, before pulling out a stack of pages from behind her back.

" *Memes in Looper culture,* " the Natsuki in the video said. " *Ever since Yggdrasil's original devastation, Loopers across the multiverse have yearned for ways to entertain themselves. Some turned to combat, others turned to practical jokes. One of the more interesting of these hobbies, however, is a unique Internet-based medium known as 'memes.' Memes, by their definition, are ideas or concepts that propagate through cultural influence. In the context of this discussion, however, we'll be specifically referring to the Internet-based memes, occasionally referred to as shitposts or 'dank' memes. In standard Hub-like loops, the progression of memes becomes increasingly unstable as the loop progresses forward in time, with most common meme formats in the 2019-2020 period rarely lasting longer than a month, and often becoming increasingly absurd to match. This style of progression is extremely unreliable for Loopers, who maintain lifespans, or at least existence-spans, exceeding billions or trillions of years. To compensate for this, the memes that Loopers share or create typically combine the absurdity of late series memes with the simplicity of early series memes, with format types and common trends being blended together for-* "

" *Natsuki!* " Monika yelled from some point off screen. " *Are you turning my thesis into a copypasta!?* "

The Natsuki burst into giggles, dropping the pages on the floor. The video ended with a cut off scream of laughter, as Monika burst into

frame, blurry with motion from lunging at Natsuki.

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

33.12 - Breathing Control, by Awesomedude17.

The art of Hamon is an ancient technique that harnesses both impeccable breathing control and impeccable blood flow. If one or the other falters, the art is rendered weakened at best and inert at worst. Although the most famous users among Loopers was Jonathan Joestar and his grandson Joseph Joestar, Hamon is not exclusively a technique used by the family. Other Loopers tend to overlook Hamon largely due to the power that can be held in a Stand, but a few special Loopers realize just how effective Hamon could be.

Natsuki, the Literature Club's most outspoken member, knew this very well. She also happened to realize what the necessary components to being able to control Hamon would allow her to do.

So with a deep breath, she placed the mouthpiece in her mouth, and began to play the theme song of her Branch on the bagpipes.

Monika banged her head on the desk in response. She knew Natsuki would get her back for the Korean BBQ/Taco fusion debacle from when they were in Remnant.

33.1, con't. - Looper Humor, by Zum1UDontNo

Natsuki and Yuri were hanging out in the Clubroom, sitting on the floor with their backs to each other. Yuri was reading a new novel, and Natsuki was idly scrolling through her phone.

"Hey Yuyu," Natsuki chuckled. "Check out this meme I got from my last Loop."

Yuri put down her book, peering over her girlfriend's shoulder. It was the number 69, on a white background in white text.

Yuri snorted. "Nice."

Compiler's Commentary:

33.1 - Haha, Loopy meemz

33.2 - This ends with Monika and MC-kun having a sick rap battle, somehow. It happens more often than you might believe.

33.3 - The Dokies never met a chocolate they didn't like.

33.4 - Clive Barker does amazing work, don't me.

33.5 - Yaaaaay, I've been waiting so long for this to continue! Very glad to see that Madotsuki got her precious Knife back, and also that she didn't stab Yuri or Natsuki with it. That could have been awkward.

33.6 - I don't blame you Monika, I'd rather get into a shootout with Hell than play Uno with my sisters ;-;

33.7 - Monika later got even with Natsuki by replacing her coconut flakes with soap shavings. Sayori and Yuri deemed this "disproportionate retribution" since it resulted in both of *them* eating soap.

33.8 - Vaporwave: Like LSD for your ears!

33.9 - Gonna be honest, it couldn't be worse than the time I want to Chuck E. Cheese's when I was seven.

33.10 - More surrealist shenanigans in the Dreamscape! Will Monika ever get to warm up? Will Madotsuki ever open up to the newcomers? THE SUSPENSE IS KILLING ME, OMOCHAO!

33.11 - I don't get coffee, like at all, so I have nothing to add to this. *sips Mountain Dew*

33.12 - Natsuki was humbled by her next loop, wherein she was Scottsuki.

Aureate Sun

Hello, friends! Here we have another Special Chapter in the Doki Doki Literature Club Infinite Loops. This one is a Fused Loop between DDLC and Fire Emblem: Three Houses, starring Sayori and Byleth as the only two Loopers. Byleth is freshly Activated Anchor for Fodlan, and Sayori is the first Looper they (she, in this loop) meets. Most of this chapter was written by Tetradrachm, except for the part titles "Aureate Sun Spot: A Sleepless Night", which was written by yours truly. Enjoy!

Aureate Sun "Route": Part One

Sayori Woke Up by actually waking up in a rather plain cot, which was a pretty good sign right off the bat that this wasn't a Baseline Loop. She immediately Pinged—or rather, tried to and failed, which meant Null Loop.

Well, they'd all been through a super long string of Baseline runs since Psyche took over, probably because she was still learning the ropes of Administering their Branch. The reconstruction of...her childhood friend (she preferred to not refer to him by any name in particular until he Looped and chose one) into a real person had taken up all of their attention for a while, and it was still such a wonderful thing, but his inconsistency was frustrating. He really needed to Activate and stabilize, bark it all. Anyway, they had all been getting bored, so she was excited that they all might get the chance to have a new adventure here! Possibly—hopefully—he would be here as well!

She decided to investigate her rather sparse room while she waited for her Loop Memories to kick in. The sunlight just barely beginning to peek into the room didn't reveal much; only a sparse few personal belongings, maybe, neatly arranged around the stone chamber—

—if only it were a prison cell, to hold a wretch like her—

Sayori froze, that old, terrible, sick feeling of emptiness roiling through her. She shut her eyes carefully and took a deep breath. Absent the usual comfort of the Force to reinforce herself, it took a little longer than usual, but she used her usual meditation to re-center herself anyway, recall her faith in herself and her goals—

—to continue to avoid every human she could, to seek mercy from the goddess, and, if she were so blessed, to continue helping the animals around the monastery.

Sayori exhaled, letting her lips buzz out as it suddenly clicked. This depression came from her Loop Memories, not her own mind. She had long since come to terms with her own self-loathing, while in this world...

Her gut clenched. Blood magic, or something like it, was the root issue here, her lineage in this world having granted her the magical "Crest" of a supposed monster. Blood magic never worked out well—she'd studied enough records of Sith Alchemy both from Baseline and Loops experiments to be sure of that. In this world—Fódlan—it seemed to be a fundamental part of the dominant feudal society, of which she was now suddenly a part.

Her name in this world, she remembered now, was Marianne von Edmund, and with her name came a slew of information that only raised more questions. A lot of potentially nasty questions, too. If this was an adventure, she suspected it was going to be a complicated one.

—

Sayori found she had a bit of a strange reputation around her new home. Her fellow students—it was a military school in which she'd Awoken, it turned out—did double takes and even gasped when she greeted them as she toured the beautiful monastery campus before classes started that morning. Her own Loop Memories made it obvious why: she'd barely ever said two words before to anyone else on campus when it wasn't absolutely necessary.

Her own house's members were especially surprised; one pink-haired girl, Hilda, openly goggled at her when she said hello, hands almost limp at her sides. "You're in a good mood today, aren't you?" Hilda asked.

"I guess so," Sayori said, smiling as brightly as she could without coming off as suspicious. Marianne was by nature an incredibly shy and passive girl, at sharp odds with her own personality, so she naturally struggled to act the same way. She'd decided to pretend as if she were gradually coming out of her shell, but apparently it was a bit too sudden for Hilda. "I just...had a good night's rest."

Hilda laughed, her long twin tails bobbing behind her. "I do know how nice a good sleep can be! Beats most of the work and classes we have here, that's for sure."

If there was one thing Sayori knew about Hilda from Marianne's memories, it was that she was profoundly—almost performatively—lazy.

"That's why I'm hoping that new student doesn't join our house—I met her earlier," Hilda continued. "She's got this kinda intensity around her, since she's been a mercenary all her life, apparently. She'd probably try and make all her classmates work harder." She pouted.

Right, the new student. In between everyone being shocked that she could talk—one student had apparently thought she was a ghost before, even—the other gossip swirling around the school that morning had centered on the brave young woman who had rescued the three houses' leaders just the night before. This Byleth was apparently the daughter of one of the greatest Knights of Seiros to have ever existed—an impressive feat, Sayori gathered, although what she knew about both the Knights and the Church to which they were sworn gave her all kinds of icky feelings. Given that Jeralt had apparently gone to great lengths to raise her outside of the Church, it's possible he and his daughter had similar thoughts. She'd need to look into the potential "transfer student."

She could look into Byleth right now, she realized with a start, as the woman in question appeared in the doorway and glanced over her and Hilda both, expression oddly blank.

"Hello again!" Hilda waved at her.

"Oh, hello!" Sayori said cheerfully, but carefully modestly, and waved with a quick flip of her arm. "I'm Marianne von Edmund, it's good to meet you!"

Byleth stared at her for a moment with a faint expression of surprise, saying nothing. Had she done something wrong? After a moment, the woman nodded and said in a low voice, "It is...good to meet you as well." She continued watching Sayori intently for a moment, almost as if she were studying her, before nodding again in farewell and taking off down the hall.

"Wonder what that was all about?" Hilda asked a bit too casually. "Something about you really surprised her. You sure you haven't met her before?"

Sayori shook her head, at a bit of a loss herself. She had never seen the blue haired woman in her life, or any previous life—although something about her appearance rang a bell—but it seemed like the opposite might not have been true. It was just another question to add to her growing list.

At least, it was until that night, when it was announced that Byleth would actually become the new professor for the Golden Deer, her house, and she spent the whole announcement staring at Sayori.

Something was definitely up with Byleth.

Aureate Sun: Part Two

—

The matter came to a head much faster than Sayori had expected, early the next morning as she wandered the monastery before classes started again.

Or rather, a point. The point of a knife.

Sayori glanced down at the dagger Byleth was very nearly jabbing into her chest, pinning her against the wall, and then asked with innocent confusion, "Is this some kind of surprise training, Professor?"

Byleth's face was unnaturally blank as usual, but a slight tension behind her eyes hinted at some sort of strong emotion—anger? Fear? Sorrow? "Who are you, really?" she snarled, jabbing the blade ever so slightly closer to her heart.

A suspicion bubbled up in Sayori's mind. More than one, actually, but the first one was most urgent. "I'm...not acting the way you expected, right?" she asked carefully. "Like...from other times all of this has happened before?"

Byleth's eyes widened, and her grip on the dagger wobbled for a moment. "How do you know about that?" she asked. Then she took on an odd, distant look, as if she were listening for something.

That...was not the usual answer new Loopers would have to that question. Sayori's mind raced—was Byleth not Looping after all? "Have you lived through coming to the Monastery before, Professor?" she asked carefully. If she screwed up here, she could—maybe, probably—fight her way out of this. All of the MMA, karate, and other martial arts she'd done with the girls over the years, mostly to stave off boredom, made her an expert compared to most any non-Looper. That is, assuming Byleth wasn't magically enhanced somehow.

Byleth snapped out of her contemplation, and nodded slowly. "I have." She paused. "Are you...a goddess?"

Sayori blinked, and blushed. "Fir no! I'm just a person—well, a really, really old person—I can explain?" she finished with a hopeful grin.

Slowly, Byleth lowered the dagger.

—

"Time repeats...beyond this universe entirely," Byleth muttered a few minutes later, that strange glazed look on her face again. They'd headed out to the lake for this conversation—apparently it was one of the safer places in the Monastery to hide from eavesdroppers. Given the dagger, it was clearly more than mercenary paranoia on Byleth's part.

"Yes, exactly," Sayori said. She'd practiced giving the Speech a few times with the girls—which reminded her, she really needed to figure out where they were this Loop—and she was glad she had; it was tricky to try and get the idea across the cultural divide. For one thing, Byleth had been oddly insistent that Sayori must be some sort of goddess to be able to travel through time until she explained that she wasn't the one causing it.

"That explains why you're...different," Byleth said after a moment.

"Different personality-wise?" Sayori asked. "Yeah, I'm not exactly like Marianne, you don't need to be to Loop in as someone—"

"No," Byleth interrupted her. "You look different than her entirely."

"Really?" Sayori glanced down at her reflection in the lake. "I just look the same as I always do back home, I guess...hmm..." Her Loop Memories didn't recall anyone who looked like the other members of the Literature Club. Maybe she actually was all alone here this Loop?

"Yes, not like the others who—" Byleth cut herself off abruptly, and then sighed.

"Others? Like the eavesdroppers you're worried about?"

"Yes," Byleth nodded soberly. "Infiltrators, from a group that wants to destroy the church and conquer Fódlan. They shapeshift, and take the guises of people they've disposed of."

Sayori gasped. "Oh, that's awful! Have they already done it this time?"

"Before I arrived at the Monastery, yes. And...the first time, one of them killed my father, and then...me, later, I suppose. That's when I woke up back here at the beginning of it all." Byleth looked utterly crestfallen, the most emotion she'd shown by far. "I've avoided it since then, but...they've defeated us every time since. That is why I threatened you earlier. My apologies, I thought you were one of them."

"I'm so sorry!" Sayori cried, lunging forward and hugging Byleth. The professor froze under the hug—all at once in a rush of embarrassment Sayori remembered that medieval feudal societies didn't really go for hugs—but then awkwardly returned it.

"I shouldn't have done that," Sayori said hastily as she pulled back. "Back on my world we hug more often—but I just felt so bad that you're just a new Looper and had to go through that, and, and you looked so sad!"

"It's fine, I understand. Thank you, Mari...Sayori." She looked a little uncomfortable—well, very slightly uncomfortable—but she offered up a faint smile, and Sayori took that as a win.

"I promise, we'll keep everyone alive this time." Byleth seemed like a brand new Looper by her attitude. Strange that the Branch would have a Fused Loop so soon, then...maybe it was a deliberate choice on the part of its Admin? "Not just that, but stopping the infiltrators too, I'm sure we can stop them! From the conquering part, I mean. The church..." Sayori trailed off uncertainly. It sure didn't seem like the church was good either, especially considering how tyrannical it

seemed to be against dissidents. It was more the sort of thing Monika might have raged against, but she didn't particularly like what she knew of the Church either.

"The church is not perfect, no," Byleth admitted. "Far from it. But...a friend of mine can help with that."

"A friend?" Sayori asked.

Byleth looked distinctly uncomfortable even as she spaced out again. "You're sure?" she muttered under her breath; it didn't seem as if it were directed to Sayori herself. After a moment, she glanced up. "I need to explain something of my own."

—

"To sum it up," Sayori said a few minutes, a bit nonplussed, "the goddess that created the entire world and that everyone in Fódlan worships literally lives in your head? And is Looping herself?" The goddess was the reason Byleth had had such a strange reaction to the idea of Sayori Looping, too—she had her own form of time reversal, albeit limited.

"Not everyone worships her, but most do," Byleth nodded. "She was...eager that I tell you."

"I...well, I get why you're the Anchor here now," Sayori laughed. "Or, Co-Anchors with Sothis, I guess. I wish I could talk to her directly."

Byleth paused—which Sayori now realized was her listening to Sothis. "She says...you speak to her in me. I don't know of any way to allow others to speak to her directly, though. She has been gaining strength with each Loop, though, so eventually she might be able to...well, we don't really know."

"That's really a shame. She could try and talk some sense into the church if you could really prove it was her."

"Rhea would believe it," Byleth declared firmly. "She already knows."

"Oh, right..." Birch, but there were so many little moving parts behind what was going on. "So, what's the game plan?"

"Sorry?" Byleth asked, brow furrowed.

"Uh, expression from home. What's your plan? How do we...solve everything? What do we need to do?"

"Solve everything?" Byleth looked uncertain. "It's difficult. Those Who Slither, the infiltrators, they have a lot of influence all across Fódlan. Even when we do defeat them, though, we've never been able to save everyone."

"When you're Looping, anything is possible! And...well, I follow a philosophy that strives for change and accomplishment wherever possible." Going any further into Pink Sith ideology would only confuse Byleth at this point. "If there's a way to fix...everything, help as many people as possible, even maybe the ones working with the bad guys, I have to try!" They were all just kids—she'd want to give them the benefit of the doubt before calling them irredeemable monsters.

She'd long since learned that practically no one was irredeemable.

Byleth considered that for a moment. "I see your point," she said. "In that case...we both need to know more. In my last few...Loops...I befriended my students, but not everyone I could every time. I just don't know enough about everyone. I suspect that if we did we might be able to resolve things peacefully."

"Really?" Sayori grinned widely. "Oh, that's amazing! I'm sure we can do it!"

Byleth smiled softly. "You're very encouraging."

Briefly, Sayori thought of Hiro...her very oldest friend. "I always try to be!"

Aureate Sun: Side-Story

"Hmph. I cannot say that I find the description of these Administrators to be very reassuring."

Sothis floated over to lean on the table which Byleth and Sayori were currently sharing, watching the former—and the only one who could actually see her—as she took notes. "Consider all of the gaping holes and inconsistencies in our own memories," the goddess continued bitterly, "not to mention the limitations they've clearly placed on my abilities!"

Byleth sighed and shook her head slightly. "We don't know that they caused it..." Their inability to use Divine Pulse outside of a few very specific moments—once at the beginning of the Loop, and once when Kronya attacked Jeralt if that still happened on schedule—had been one of their biggest unknowns before Sayori arrived, right behind the cause of time repeating entirely. It had been one of Byleth's biggest frustrations time and time again, not that she could often feel them all that strongly: that they might have had a way to save her slaughtered students and colleagues that they could not use.

"Given that I cannot think of any other reason why—" Sothis began, as the same time as Sayori jerked her head up and asked, "Oh, did Sothis say something?"

"Tell her!" Sothis urged Byleth, and with only the faintest stirring of irritation did she nod and turn to Sayori.

"Sothis suspects that it's our Administrator's fault that she cannot use her Divine Pulse very often." While it was mildly annoying to have to be the interpreter between Sothis and Sayori, Byleth was more than willing to give Sothis her first chance at directly talking to someone

else that she'd had in a long, long time. She could tell—sense through their connection that neither of them completely understood—that Sothis enjoyed it, and that she genuinely liked Sayori. Byleth liked her too; she was friendly, optimistic, and empathetic, and her confidence gave Byleth hope that this time she and Sothis might actually live to see the end of the war with all of her charges alive and well.

It wasn't even a goal she'd firmly had before meeting Sayori; before then, she'd just been desperately hoping for answers—as much as she could, since each new Loop saw her emotions fade away again.

This repeat—erm, Loop—she'd actually been inspired enough to try and put some of her more complicated ideas for helping her students into action, like writing a letter to Lord Lonato before he could begin his rebellion. She hadn't heard back yet, but she was hopeful that she could save Ashe's father.

"Hmm..." Sayori considered this for a minute, tapping her quill against the table. "Well, first off, call 'em Admins for short, or else people will think you're too uptight." Sothis huffed, but in a light-hearted way. "Next, I wouldn't be surprised if that was true. Time travel magic is one of those really finicky things that the Admins put special preventions on. I don't know if that'll ever change for you or not...I'm sorry." She flashed Byleth a quick frown.

"It's alright," she answered, although a swell of disappointment bloomed in her chest. Well, that was something at least—more emotion was...good, in Byleth's opinion. She was always happier when it returned each loop.

"It's probably because you're getting closer to her," Sothis pointed out—she could always hear Byleth's thoughts—and then frowned sharply. "But alas! It may be that my divine power is forever locked away. If that is so...well, I could hardly bear it! I cannot speak to anyone but you and my one method of reaching out to the wider world is gone? What am I to do?" Sothis was genuinely distraught

over this, and there was nothing Byleth could do. She could hardly even empathize all that deeply with her!

All she could do was sigh in response, and that was such a lackluster answer that she could almost hate herself for it. Try all she did, it was impossible to restore her ability to feel emotions any other way than giving it time each and every loop. It grated.

"What happened now?" Sayori asked, and Byleth steeled herself to answer. Instead, Sayori looked at her more carefully and furrowed her brow. "Are you...okay, Byleth?"

Byleth stared at her, at a sudden loss. She didn't have an answer, really. But perhaps that was an answer in and of itself. "Not really..."

"Aww, what's wrong?"

"Sothis is discouraged"—the goddess nodded vigorously, although her eyes were starting to get heavy in the way they did when she tired out—"and so am I," she admitted. "What can we do about the problems that the loops cause for us instead of solve?"

Now it was Sayori's turn to sigh. "Trust me, I've been there. All of my friends and I, we've all suffered because of looping. We're mostly getting better now, but...bah, that doesn't matter right now. The thing is, a lot of those problems just take time to solve. Time and out-of-Loop tricks, sometimes. Okay, so, Sothis feels frustrated because of her powers not working right..." She shifted her attention to the side of the desk where Byleth had told her Sothis was floating earlier. "Well, one thing that might help if you know is that you'll probably get some Variant powers that you'll be able to keep soon. Those are way more common than actual Fused Loops. One of them might even let you have a physical body!"

"How...wonderful..." Sothis yawned hugely and then slumped over onto the desk.

"She appreciates it," Byleth said hastily.

"Good! Now, what about you? What's bothering you?"

"Almost nothing," Byleth said tonelessly. "That's the problem."

"Why...oh! Your emotions, they're all suppressed, right. Shoot." Sayori picked up her quill and held it in her hand on her cheek, deep in thought. "And you said that the cause was different each Loop, right?"

"Once Sothis was able to cut it off on her own as soon as we Woke Up, but usually she doesn't have direct control over it."

"Yeah, it's probably Loop Variable then. Darn." She nibbled on the back of her quill, lost in thought, but it tickled her nose and she immediately reared back into an unexpectedly huge sneeze. It echoed through their little corner of the library. Sothis was startled out of her nap, and Byleth snorted, even to her own surprise.

"Uh..." Sayori blushed bright red. "Sorry, I forgot I wasn't holding a pencil...uh, anyway, well, there are some ways to move your soul around out there in Yggdrasil, that might be able to temporarily separate you two enough to break the effect, like Shinigami badges from Bleach, or plain old astral projection—I know Steven and Finn over in the Cartoon Network Cluster are pretty good at it."

"Separate us?" Byleth asked uncertainly. "Would that be...safe?"

"I'm not sure," Sayori admitted. "Probably not, but if you ever meet one of the astral projector experts you could ask them...wait, how is it that it wears off normally?"

"That changes every time as well!" Sothis groused, already half awake again.

"We don't know for sure, but it has to do with Sothis waking up and regaining her strength. Well, that and possibly our time spent at the monastery, getting closer to the students and faculty...I had an isolated childhood," Byleth said awkwardly. It didn't help that almost

everything about it was different each time too. Once she'd grown up almost entirely in Fódlan's Throat fighting off the Almyrans; another time it had been up in Galatea territory fighting against Sreng. The common thread was that Jeralt generally kept her isolated (not without cause), and she didn't have many friends until she arrived at Garreg Mach.

"Oh, that's really good then!" Sayori said cheerfully. "See, for one thing, every Looper's power grows a bit every single Loop, and that excess power does things like create the Pocket. But the thing is that it also can make you more powerful normally, so that means that eventually she'll be strong enough to be awake more, which will probably help keep your emotions active!"

Sothis hummed appreciatively, but she was mostly asleep by now.

"And the other thing is that if it really is your bonds with your friends that help, it'll probably make a big difference once they Activate! Then they'll remember their friendship with you and you won't have to work to build it all over again, right?"

"I guess so," Byleth said thoughtfully. The idea of her friends Looping was incredibly tempting—but it might be tricky too. What would they remember, exactly? Which repeat, which series of events would they know?

Still though, they were all smart people. Eventually they'd be able to sort through their possible issues if they Activated. She'd make sure of it.

Aureate Sun: Part Three

—

She really was alone here.

Or rather, as far as Sayori could tell none of the Loopers from her Branch had come with her to Fódlan. She'd been all over the Monastery, even—carefully—into Abyss beneath it, and hadn't seen anyone that looked or acted like her friends. It was possible they were scattered in other parts of the world, but she had no way of finding out where they might be. Being away from them stung; it always did, but especially badly in a Null, slow loop like this where she might find herself with nothing to do for hours on end and the darkness crept in at the edges.

So she threw herself into her project of helping everybody. She had daily "tutoring" sessions with Byleth where she taught her (them, actually, gender-variable) and Sothis about Yggdrasil and the regular concepts like the Ping and the Pocket. She couldn't actually show them how to do either, unfortunately, but at least they'd have the groundwork laid out for whenever they had their next Fused Loop.

It wasn't as difficult a challenge as Sayori would have thought to teach Byleth and Sothis about more technologically advanced worlds, at least; it turned out this world was a good deal more advanced than it appeared, with many inventions forbidden by the Church itself.

Monika would have convinced Byleth to start a revolution by now if she were in Sayori's place.

But Byleth still hoped to find a way to reconciliation without any war, and that meant stopping the Slitherers' plans as quickly as possible first. The trouble with that was that their plans were Loop Variable right up until they attempted to infiltrate the castle in a few months' time. Byleth had a plan to trap and expose them when one of them—Kronya—was supposed to be snuck into the monastery, and Sayori didn't mind waiting until then. It gave her the chance to get to know her classmates better, and hopefully help them with the struggles so many of them faced.

"Hey there, miss cheerful!"

And, occasionally, dealing with nosy house leaders.

"Hello, Claude," she called with a wave as she crossed the pavilion. She was headed for the library this morning, just as she had been every morning for the past few weeks. It turned out that Marianne's specialties were in certain types of light magic and in swordsmanship. It was an unusual combination to be sure, but fitting given what Byleth had told her about her Crest. It was oddly fitting that she was in a Fused Loop learning magic at a school again; the last time she'd done a lot of magic was at Hogwarts. If only she could just solo the Slitherers the way she'd beat Voldemort...

"Hey!" he jogged up next to her. "Wait up! I wanted to ask you something! I'm glad that you've been, uh, feeling better lately, but I've been burning to understand why."

"Oh! Well...a lot of different things, I guess? I've settled in more here at the Academy, and it's been really great getting to know everybody better!"

"Sure, I get that, but you didn't really seem like the kind of person who wanted to get to know everybody better at first. You pretty much ran away from me the first time we met." He studied her for a second. "Had a difficult childhood, huh?"

She had had difficult childhoods in weird Fused Loops before, if that counted. Birch, in this Loop too. "You could say that..."

"Well, trust me, I know that feeling." He stretched his arms behind his head in an overly casual way. "But look at you now, coming out of your shell in spite of it all, like a baby bird seeing the world for the first time." She rolled that analogy around in her head for a moment, and his face fell slightly. "You like animals, right? I was going for an analogy you'd like."

Sayori cut him off with a giggle, a real one. "I do love animals, Claude." It was true. She already loved Dorte, her horse this Loop,

very, very much. "And I do like your analogy! Coming to Garreg Mach has definitely been a brand new eggs-perience for me!"

Claude stared at her, mouth slightly open, then burst into laughter. "I was not expecting that! That was—that was great! Man, that's just what I meant, though. I was wondering, though—is some of it Teach?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, has she made you feel more comfortable here, too?"

"Definitely. She's taught me so much already, and she's been...really nice to me." Byleth really was a good person, sensitive and insightful. She'd quickly understood Yggdrasil, not to mention the watered down version of her personal backstory. Sothis seemed nice enough too, but a bit grumpier—chomping at the bit to not be stuck as a disembodied voice in someone else's head. Thankfully, the Loops had all sorts of solutions for that.

"I totally know what you mean. She's awesome." Claude paused, looking off into the distance in thought. "Right, thanks. I just wanted to check up on you, as part of my duty as House leader and all that." He winked. "I won't keep you any longer, I know you've got important studying to do. See ya!" He walked off with the same confident swagger he always had.

Sayori watched him leave for a moment. She was fairly certain that the real reason he'd been so curious about how she was doing was to get another opinion on Byleth. He was probably weighing his options as to how useful she might be in the future as an ally and whether he might eventually trust her; in spite of his apparent outgoing attitude it was clear he kept everyone at arm's length.

It came down to a difficult childhood, according to Byleth. Not that he was alone in that—sometimes it almost seemed like all of Fódlan ran on Freudian logic—but it did make her wish she could help him. That

was Byleth's job, though, as his professor; she knew him and the other Golden Deer well enough by now to help them.

She was so lost in her thoughts as she entered the library that she didn't even spot its only other occupant at first. As she pulled out a chair to sit down, though, he sucked in a breath in surprise and looked up.

"Ah, Marianne," Dimitri said politely. "Good morning."

"Hello, Dimitri," she said with a nod. She knew he didn't like to be called "Your Highness," and that he was the very model of a modern modest prince, but beyond that she didn't really know him all that well. She certainly felt horribly sorry for him, though, from what Byleth had told her. To have been through so much, to suffer through mental illness because of it—it was awful. She shook off those morbid thoughts—this time!—and instead said, "I don't often see you here in the library."

"No," he laughed, "I suppose I'm not in here often. You would know; you're here almost every day, are you not?"

"Yeah, actually," she said, taken a bit aback that he had even noticed. "Well, here in the mornings when I don't have lectures or classes, and then afternoons in the training grounds—"

"Well, I have seen you there, of course," he said with a smile. "Sparring with Ignatz, and Ingrid, and once Felix, I recall."

"Oh, no, you saw my spar with Felix?" She was slightly tempted to bury her face in her hands. "He only fought me once because of how badly he beat me!" Granted, she'd handicapped herself a bit due to trying to follow the sword-fighting style of Fódlan as opposed to the lightsaber forms she usually used, but Felix was a hell of a fighter.

"Your technique is very good for someone just starting out!" he protested. "You have nothing to be ashamed of, I assure you."

"Thanks. Well, you're quite the duelist yourself, especially with that spear."

"Well, I've been training with it for...quite some time, now." He glances down at his hands. "It's very important to me," he said softly.

She knew just why it was so important to him, too; the Tragedy of Duscur, and all it entailed. She knew more about it than he did, a fact that twisted her stomach in the wrong way. Suddenly desperate to change the subject, she asked, "So, what were you doing here in the library, anyway?"

"Oh, I was just checking some old financial records. I was curious about...donations to the church. It says that my step-uncle, Lord Arundel, completely stopped donating a few years ago, and I am uncertain why."

Crap, she knew why—Arundel was one of the Slitherers now. And she hadn't realized he was Dimitri's uncle! She couldn't tell him because it might send things off the rails, and that was too big of a risk to take with the Slitherers still at large. But it was another member of his family lost to him...

She couldn't just say nothing. "People...change, sometimes. And sometimes, they're never who you thought they were in the first place." Unbidden, thoughts of her first friend came to mind. He changed every Loop now, so completely different sometimes that she couldn't even think of him as the same person. She almost always had Loop Memories of him as her dear friend, but the nature of that relationship was so variable that she felt alienated from every version of him now.

She didn't know what to think of that.

"I suppose you're right," Dimitri said, cutting off her train of thought. "He does seem a changed man, these days. Everyone changes, really." He looked up at her. "But that isn't always a bad thing."

"No?"

"No," he shook his head. "It's just a fact of life. All we can do is try to make the best of it, and right wrongs as best we can."

"What about...when you can't right a wrong?" she was compelled to ask. "When there's nothing you can do?"

He stared her in the eyes. "There's always something you can do. As long as you live, you can act. I'd go so far as to say that you have to act." Almost under his breath, he repeated, "You have to."

It wasn't often that someone that didn't know her well hit on a deep conviction Sayori held, but in that moment Dimitri did just that. To always act if you can—that was a core tenet of Pink Sith philosophy.

He was right, she knew it down to her bones, and in that moment she decided to act now as well; she would save him from his Baseline fate however she could.

Aureate Sun: Part Four

—

The entire monastery seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, but for Sayori the stress was only beginning. The plan she had created with Byleth was about to kick off, and a lot of things needed to go just right in rapid succession.

Flayn had been kidnapped and then recovered just a few hours ago in a harrowing battle beneath the school against the Death Knight. It was the most intense battle the Golden Deer had had so far, and Sayori was intensely glad for all the training she'd been putting in these past few months. She was the team's best sword fighter by now—Felix was far more interested in sparring with her these days—and a decent healer and light mage to boot. Still, she'd been more

than willing to leave fighting Jeritza himself to Lysithea. She was the one that could knock him off his horse with one spell, after all.

Now Flayn was recuperating in her chambers, tended to almost viciously by Seteth, and Monica—who thankfully looked nothing like her Monika—had just been thrown a celebration in the Black Eagles' quarters before getting summoned by Rhea for questioning about her "ordeal." Byleth was busy rounding up as many of the Church officials and Knights of Seiros as she could find while Sayori tracked down Claude and Dimitri. It was critically important that every house was in on this—every house but the Black Eagles for now, that is.

"What's the new crisis, Marianne? Did Teach tell you?" Claude asked, a bit frustrated, as they hurried through a second story hallway toward Rhea's chambers.

"Sort of. Hopefully, we're gonna stop it before it happens!" She tried to inject as much cheer into her voice as she could, but after the battle she was mostly just exhausted, same as him. It was a good thing that this next part would be quick—either way.

At least Dimitri seemed well-rested. "Have we tracked down the Death Knight again?" he asked, deadly serious.

"Not yet," she replied as they finally reached the door. "Okay, both of you get your weapons ready. There might be a fight right away!"

"In Rhea's chambers?" Claude asked dubiously. "Sheesh, talk about a crisis."

Nonetheless, both house leaders lifted their weapons and she opened the door. Inside, Rhea and Monica turned towards them in confusion as Sayori lifted her hand and recited the spell she'd been running through her head all day to be sure she got it right on the first try. The spell shot out of her hands, washed over Monica, and she was briefly frozen in place as her disguise faded.

Rhea gasped in horror and stumbled back. "You..." she growled. "Marianne? What is this?"

"She's a spy!" Sayori cried. The now revealed Kronya, visibly overwhelmed with fear and rage, leapt at Rhea and knocked her to the floor. She pulled a blade out from somewhere and pressed it to the Archbishop's throat. She said something, but the Silence still affected her and it became a soundless snarl.

Sayori heard Dimitri and Claude rush into the room behind her, and the clamor of a rush of boots down the hall—Byleth and the Knights?—but she was busy, frantically struggling with the one tome she had on her that might help. In their planning, neither Byleth nor her had suspected she'd immediately leap to hostage taking, so they hadn't prepped much that could help. She pulled out the book as Rhea and Kronya kept struggling on the floor and it felt like everyone was screaming, and quickly cast an intentionally weak Lightning. It was only a brief flash of light, but it was enough—Kronya visibly recoiled, and before she could get her bearings again an arrow sprouted from her back.

"—AUGH!" she screamed as she collapsed in pain, the Silence finally wearing off. "How dare you! You filthy—agh—pathetic fools! You have no right to—"

Rhea clambered to her feet, holding the dagger at the Agarthan's neck now. "I know exactly who, and what, you are," she thundered. "You have no right to be in this place!"

Kronya screamed wordlessly and tried to straggle to her feet as well, but Catherine and Alois appeared almost out of nowhere to restrain her instead. Everyone rushed in now: Byleth, Seteth, a crowd of Knights, and in the back Sayori spotted a very confused Hanneman.

"Solon!" Kronya screamed in desperation. In a flash of purple light he actually appeared, clad as Tomas—but Byleth had expected this. She flicked the tip of the Sword of the Creator at him just as he materialized and caught him in the neck, cutting off his counter spell

with a jerk and gurgle of blood. His own disguise dissipated as he collapsed to the floor.

Rhea, disgust in her eyes, glanced between the two of them. "So the corruption grew deeper than we thought! Yes, I know full well who you are—wretched traitors of the goddess!"

"Do you have any idea of the retribution we will wreak against you?" Kronya coughed. "That we have already—"

"You will do no such thing!" Rhea snarled. "As of now your very lives are forfeit!"

"You...truly believe it is only the two of us?" Solon croaked from the floor, still somehow conscious. "Heh. Such foolishness. We are far more numerous and powerful than you could ever...grk...imagine. Our hands hold the strings of Fódlan from the shadows. We could kill everyone in this room and make it look like an accident." He smirked. "Or a senseless tragedy."

"Enough!" Rhea pointed out the door. "This ends now. Not only your meaningless ramblings, but your schemes altogether! I will not let you, or anyone, threaten this land again!" She was almost incoherent with rage, and in that moment Sayori could clearly see Saint Seiros in all her terrifying glory.

The knights closest to the two Agarthans finally hefted them up and led them away, Kronya sobbing and Solon entirely silent but clutching at the wound in his neck. Rhea tore her eyes away from them to Byleth, standing tall with only the barest hint of triumph.

"You knew," Rhea said, and Byleth nodded. "How?"

"Who were those people?" Dimitri suddenly asked. He stepped forward, a strange glint in his eyes. "Who, Professor? Archbishop?"

"I admit, I'm curious myself," Claude chimed in.

"I can explain everything," Byleth said, glancing between everyone in the room now watching her. "They are Agarthans, ancient enemies of the goddess and her followers"—Rhea gasped—"and I will explain how I know this...in the Holy Tomb. Please, can we gather all of the students for this?"

Rhea, stunned, only nodded.

-Aureate Sun Spot: A Sleepless Night-

In his dormitory room in the monastery of Garreg Mach, Prince Dimitri Alexandre Blaiddyd of the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus was tossing and turning in his bed. It happened, some nights, that four year old memories would creep into his thoughts. He had nightmares so vivid that even when he awoke the sounds of people dying rang in his ears, the scent of blood and smoke lingered in his nose...and he could swear he saw their ghosts. Cold sweat soaked his night clothes, leaving him feeling so chilled he had to wonder if he, himself, was a ghost trapped in an endless delusion. The only sense that wasn't haunted was his sense of taste, which he had lost entirely.

There was nothing to be done but wander the monastery at night, like the ghost he sometimes wondered if he was, and hope the cool night air would clear his head. When an hour of such aimless wandering brought no relief, he turned his feet toward the training hall. He'd grab the heaviest blunted training weapon he could find and...exhaust himself. His nightmares couldn't rob him of sleep if he was too tired to think, let alone remember, right?

He knew very well that didn't always work, but it was the best he could think to do at the moment. It worked, sometimes, at least. If all else failed, he could (with great reluctance) see if Dedue was losing sleep tonight. He hated to bother his friend, but he was the only one who...who understood the nightmares. And while Dedue wasn't the best conversationalist, he was a great listener.

Dimitri grit his teeth as he neared the training hall, because the phantasmic din of battle was starting to get louder in his ears. As if his ghosts could sense him trying to escape them, and were redoubling their infernal efforts to ruin his fragile peace of mind out of spite. But wait...no…Dimitri frowned, as an unfamiliar voice reached his ears. It sounded like a woman. A *young* woman. Not like any of the knights who had perished with his parents. Was this voice real?

He slowed his approach and lightened his steps, creeping closer to the training dummies. He peeked around the corner, and his eyes widened in shock.

By the guttering light of a torch, he beheld none other than Marianne von Edmund, a student from the Golden Deer House, assaulting a training dummy with a sword. Well, 'assaulting' was a...kind of a *weak* word, Dimitri thought, for what he was seeing. She was *savaging* it, hacking and slashing and ripping and tearing into the stuffed, padded, and lightly armored dummy. Every few swings, she let out an incoherent snarl of...anger? Frustration? Pain? It was a feeling Dimitri recognized, but couldn't give an exact name.

Abruptly, Marianne twirled from one thoroughly ruined dummy to the one next to it, running it through in the same motion before yanking her sword free and starting over. The sword didn't come free, though, and she kept yanking at it. Finally, she lifted one leg and planted it against the dummy's chest, and pulled her sword free with a mighty pull and a roar of effort. And as soon as it did, Marianne was forced to jump backwards on one leg, flailing wildly until she fell backwards with all the grace of a dead goose in freefall. Her sword flew out of her hand, scoring off of a pillar and spraying sparks into the gloom.

Dimitri sprang forward from his unintentionally-hiding place.

When Sayori's head struck the stone floor, she very distinctly heard 'Hiroaka' yelling "Sayori, you dummy! Be more careful, I can't put you back together if you get all busted up."

She was having trouble sleeping; Null Loops made it harder for her to manage her depression, and besides that she was stressing about helping Byleth cope with the imminent war and keeping her students alive. So, she figured she would go for a midnight stroll to clear her thoughts. She wound up near the training hall, and decided on a whim to get in some after-hours sword practice.

She needed to adapt the combat forms Pinkie had taught her so she could better use them with metal swords. She needed to earn Felix's respect so she could help Byleth mend his and Dimitri's friendship; just one of many steps to take to unite the students of Garreg Mach into a cohesive front. Sayori firmly believed that there was nothing stronger than a unified group of people, who trusted and cared for each other, working toward a common goal.

Sayori didn't like violence. She hated it, in fact. But in her Sith training, she had learned how to use it. Even if it weren't a Null Loop, Sayori didn't think she had the power to nonviolently end the threat Byleth had described to her. So she had to hone her violent skills, so she could be helpful.

She had only meant to practice her forms, but as she exerted herself her heart started beating faster, adrenaline started coursing through her system, and instead of tiring out she felt more awake. The muddled, indistinct thoughts that had been merely keeping her awake were crystalizing. But this kind of clarity only made her more frustrated. All the social networking she was doing, trying to strengthen the bonds between the other students, for whatever reason was making her think of her old...her *best* friend, she kept reinforcing to herself.

Sayori was used to dealing with her own depression, but looking back on her memories as 'Marianne', and recalling Marianne's irrational self-loathing, gave her a new sense of appreciation for how far she, herself, had come since she had started Looping. The same could be said for her friends, Monika, Yuri, and Natsuki. Well, Monika still left a lot to be desired, but Sayori knew she would get there

eventually. Her and her friends had all come so far, and grown so much…

All but the friend dearest to her heart. The one she missed the most. Since the Refactoring, he was more….personable, then he used to be. But unless- *until* , she firmly thought at herself-he started Looping, he couldn't grow and change with them. Every loop, he went back to who he used to be, except some loops his personality was completely randomized! It was so damned frustrating! She had worked *so hard* to make *everything better* for *everyone* , and while she wasn't exactly doing it *for* the Tree's sake, she knew that the Tree benefitted from her keeping her friends stable...but she still didn't have the only thing *she* wanted from the *Tree* . She was doing her best to be patient...but she wasn't a very patient person, really, and patience was not a virtue Pinkie had emphasized in their training.

Sayori wasn't sure when it happened, but at some point her training routine had gotten sloppier and sloppier, making her more and more frustrated until…

The training hall echoed with the ' *Crack!'* of her head bouncing off the stone floor. White lightning bolts of pain screamed up and down her nerves, driving every other thought and feeling out of her senses. Instinctively, she curled up into a tight ball and started crying, clutching the back of her head. She had already been close to winded by her physical exertions, and what little air had been in her lungs had been driven out when she hit the floor. Now she felt like she couldn't breathe at all, and she couldn't concentrate to compose herself because her skull felt like it had split in half.

Tears swam from her eyes, which burned so badly that she couldn't keep them open. Little by little, Sayori drew in enough breath to start cursing herself. "Dummy...clumsy...stupid...graceless...idiot…" she hissed even as she tried to restablish her regular breathing.

"Enough of that," said a deep, masculine voice from *very* nearby.

' *Dimitri?!'* Sayori thought. Then she abruptly realized she was not on the floor. She was moving through the air, held by two *very* strong arms. She was being held so steadily that she could hardly tell she was being carried at all. ' *Wow. He really is strong.'*

"Um...where are we going?" she asked.

"The infirmary, of course. You took a very solid blow to the head, you could have a concussion," Dimitri informed her matter-of-factly. There was a familiar tension in his voice, and a familiar tightness in his expression.

Sayori's first, reflexive thought was that it was exasperation, as her old friend would express whenever she hurt herself. But no, she intuited that it wasn't directed at her. There was a preoccupation to it. It was reminiscent of when Monika would throw herself into some problem so she didn't have to think about something else.

"Uh, I know you're being gentlemanly and all, but I can walk to the infirmary," Sayori said meekly, "I didn't hurt my legs."

Dimitri gave no notice of her words. His attention seemed...elsewhere. Sayori sighed, and decided not to press the issue. She could tell that he was, in part, helping her so he didn't have to think about something else. Thanks to Byleth, she was pretty sure she knew what that 'something else' was. After all, he must have been in or very close to the training hall when she fell, probably for reasons similar to why she was there, losing her cool and wailing on training dummies like they owed her money.

Some nights, when she didn't have a date, Professor Manuela was known to hang out in the infirmary after dark, usually with a book or some things she needed to grade for her class, just in case. Tonight was not one of those nights, and Sayori couldn't help but feel a little relieved. She didn't really feel like explaining how she had gotten herself into this situation.

' *Probably going to have to at least explain to Dimitri what I was up to, though,'* she decided. Funnily enough, thinking of explaining herself to him didn't seem to bother her as much. ' *Well, even if it's not strictly his business, leaving him in the dark after he brought me to the infirmary and all would be pretty rude,'* she reasoned.

Dimitri gently sat her down on one of the beds. "Stay here, I'll go get Professor Manuela," he said as he straightened up and moved toward the door.

"What?! No!" yelped Sayori, jumping up to her feet to stop him...and then immediately sinking to her knees as the throbbing ache in her head surged to a crescendo. Still, she was expecting the pain this time, so she had the presence of mind to stop her fall by slapping a hand on the floor. She immediately made herself stand up again, using a mental exercise Pinkie had taught her to convert the pain into motive energy and sending it into her legs. ' *Fire burns less when you gallop straight through, fire burns less when you gallop straight through, fire burns less when you gallop straight through.'*

"No, don't wake her up...I'll be fine, I don't think I'm concussed, and even if I am I know how to deal with it myself. Please don't bother her."

"You could have a skull fracture," said Dimitri sternly, "Or burst blood vessels in your brain, even. And if you *are* concussed, you most certainly shouldn't be attempting to cast any kind of magic. *Especially* not healing magic on yourself; you could make things worse."

' *Big surprise, there...NO! Bad Sayori, stay positive!'* Sayori sighed and grabbed Dimitri's arm. " *Please* , I will be fine. There's no need to disturb other people on my account."

Dimitri frowned. "Why do you do that, Marianne?" he asked.

Sayori blinked. "Do...what? Be considerate of others?" she asked.

"Downplay your own value," Dimitri sighed. "It seems everytime I see you you're doing for others and asking nothing in return."

"Yeah, that's how I do," Sayori agreed. "Does that...bother you?"

"Not in principle, but the degree to which you do it worries me. It's all good and well to be charitable, but it's okay to let others help you in turn. It...isn't *wrong* to have your own moments of selfishness. You're only human."

Sayori's stomach clenched. This discussion felt very familiar...she had a similar one with her old friend, every Baseline loop after she revealed her depression to him. She gave a weary sigh, with an edge of frustrated anger to it. "You don't understand, my depression isn't the only reason I'm selfless; being selfless is what makes me happy, and it's not just that people doing things for me makes me uncomfortable, or anything. I *don't like it* . If I need help, I will ask for it, but I'm much happier being the helper."

Dimitri slowly blinked and cocked his head. "Your...what?"

Sayori blinked back at him. "My what what?"

"You...you just said that you're depressed," he said, very seriously.

' *Oh fluffmunchkins, I said the D word, didn't I?'*

"What do you have to be depressed about?" Dimitri asked, "Has anyone been causing you distress? Have you gotten bad news from home?"

Sayori gave another agitated sigh, and her headache intensified, which only made her irritation worse. "Dimitri," Sayori tried not to growl, "You're just trying to be kind, and I appreciate it...but right now, the only person causing me distress is *you* . I was already in a bad mood tonight, so just...just leave it be, please? I won't go to sleep, just in case I'm concussed, I'll stay up until Professor Manuela or

Professor Byleth wake up. But please, for the love of G...the goddess, *please stop fussing over me I beg of you* ."

"I...I don't understand," said Dimitri, half-gawking.

"I know you don't, and it's not your fault," Sayori sighed, sitting back down on the bed and rubbing the back of her head. She froze, and brought her hand around so she could see it. There was a little blood on her fingers. Something about the sight of her blood dried up the last little bit of care she had for her demeanor, and her 'mask' fell off entirely. "Oh... *fuck* me," she muttered.

Dimitri now fully gawked at her. "M-Marianne!"

"Sayori," Sayori snapped. She stood up from the bed once more, and started out of the infirmary with an aggressive stride.

"What?" Dimitri asked as he ran to catch up with her in the corridor outside.

"Don't worry about it, Dimitri," Sayori groaned. "Just mind your own business."

"...very well, I will hold my tongue. But regardless of your feelings toward me, you have a serious injury and I'm not going to leave you alone until I've seen it tended to," Dimitri said firmly.

Sayori suddenly stopped short and pivoted to face Dimitri, holding a hand up. "You said I shouldn't try using magic with a head injury. I *will* cast Thoron on you if you don't *leave me alone* ."

Dimitri's heart skipped a beat, and then started beating double-time. His eyes narrowed, and without thinking about it his hand found the hilt of the saber on his side, gripping it tightly. "I am very concerned for your current state, Marianne, but that is a *very* serious threat to make."

"I don't make *threats* , Your Highness. I make promises, and I'm very good at keeping them," Sayori said in an exhausted tone. Without waiting for him to respond, she dropped her hand and turned around, continuing on to the training hall.

A couple days later, Dimitri was back in the training hall doing drills with a training lance. He stopped to wipe the sweat off his forehead, and abruptly realized how quiet it was. Looking around, he realized everyone else who had been drilling with him had left. He chuckled a little, and started toward the exit. Then he saw 'Marianne.'

Sayori entered the training hall and made a beeline for the racks, where she picked out a pair of wooden swords. Then she approached Dimitri and underhand pitched a sword at him. It took him by surprise, but he still caught it easily enough. "Marianne?"

"EN GARDE!" Sayori suddenly yelled before dashing at him. Dimitri's eyes widened, and he moved reflexively to parry her initial strike.

"Marianne, what are you doing?!" he demanded.

"We parted ways on a...sour note, the other night," said Sayori as she backed up and settled into a guarding stance. "Wanted to apologize, but I've still got some aggression to bleed off, and you're better at fighting than talking about feelings and junk, so….APOLOGY FIGHT!" Sayori yelled before attacking him again.

Dimitri was fairly surprised. 'Marianne' had demonstrated a far, far higher degree of proficiency with the sword than he had ever seen from her before. She also used a highly unorthodox style. She typically kept her sword in one hand at a time, only putting her other hand on the hilt to change hands. Otherwise, she kept her non-sword arm way out, as if for balance. She didn't keep her feet in-line, like a fencer, either, she kept them widely spaced and square. To Dimitri, it seemed completely counterintuitive. She had no leverage, she was wide open, she had no guard to speak of, and everything Dimitri knew about swordfighting told him he should have trounced her handily.

Instead, he wasn't able to land a hit on her. Whenever he swung at her, she just wasn't there anymore. When she swung at him, he would move to parry, but then her wooden sword was coming at him from a different angle. It wasn't just that she was fast. Felix was much faster, and Dimitri could generally hold his own against him. No, the real trick was that he couldn't read her movements. Whatever he *thought* she was going to do, she did something else.

Still, her style had very little power behind it. If she had a sharp, metal sword that was light enough not to impair her movements, he'd be in serious danger of taking a hit to his vitals. But since she was wielding a wooden sword, and she could only swing it with so much force when she was one-handing it and constantly darting around erratically, so she was basically just whacking him with a stick. Hard enough to annoy him, but not enough to really *hurt* .

The fight came to an end when Sayori started running out of steam, and Dimitri smacked her weapon out of her hand, sending it flying across the room.

"Eheheh, good match?" Sayori asked.

Dimitri just grunted, and went to retrieve the fallen training weapon, and then returned both swords to the rack. He turned around and saw Sayori standing still, watching him curiously. "How does your head feel?" he asked.

"Fine. Really, it does," she assured him. "I'm sorry I got so mad at you. You weren't trying to be a pain, you were just trying to be helpful when I was in a bad mood."

"And what was it that put you in such a bad mood?" asked Dimitri, standing in front of her with his arms folded.

Sayori took a deep breath and sighed it out. "Nothing, exactly. I was just really feeling my depression that night. The way you were fussing over me brought up old, unhappy memories. But it's okay!

You had no way of knowing, you were just trying to be nice. I hit the end of my patience and lashed out at you, and I'm sorry."

"I'm still confused as to *what* you're depressed about. Is there anything I, or anyone, can do to help?"

Sayori's mouth twitched. "Not in the way you're thinking. It's just something I have to suffer through sometimes. If you want to help me through it, just be my friend. And don't make a huge fuss over me, I *hate* being fussed over," Sayori added, folding her arms. "It's like….if Dedue never stopped fussing over you, you'd get sick of it too."

Dimitri looked up, thinking back on all the times Dedue got carried away with the whole "loyal vassal" thing. While Dimitri realized that Dedue's loyalty and subservience was entirely appropriate, considering Dimitri himself was a noble, royalty even, and Dedue was not only commonborn but also owed Dimitri his life….Dimitri still found it frustrating, and missed when Dedue had known nothing of vassalhood and had just treated him like a good friend. If *that* was how Marianne felt when people bothered her about her feelings….he didn't quite understand her reasoning, but he supposed he could at least sympathize with that feeling.

"Very well. If that's how you feel, I shall do my best not to be a bother," Dimitri agreed.

"I could also use a sparring partner," Sayori added. "I need a good swordfighter to help me redefine my technique, and my classmates….kind of have a hard time giving me their best," she grumbled. "And the Professor isn't always available, of course."

Dimitri briefly imagined how he would feel if the other Blue Lions refused to give him their best during sparring matches, just because of his station. Some of them, like Ashe, actually did feel that way. "Certainly, I would be happy to help you….wait, 'redefine'? Don't you mean 'refine' your technique?"

"Yeah, that's what I said!" Sayori chirped.

And that was how Dimitri and Sayori became sparring partners for the rest of the loop.

Aureate Sun: Part Five

—

The Holy Tomb was massive and dark, the full size of the chamber almost impossible to make out. Most of the light came from the torches of the murmuring crowd, creating shadows which shifted across the distant walls.

Sayori found herself standing between Claude and Hilda in the crowd, torn between worry and relief that the plan was firmly in motion. Claude was unusually silent, while Hilda had only quieted down after grilling them both extensively on what was going on. Now, she was busy filling in Ignatz and Lysithea next to her, who were both visibly shocked.

Sayori herself was busy scanning the crowd for the people she needed to track most.

Edelgard hadn't panicked or fled the monastery when they'd heard the news about the Agarthans, but she was visibly tense, standing stiff a ways in front of her. Sayori had made an effort to get to know her over the past few months because she so achingly reminded her of Monika; she knew how to reach out to her, and potentially how to help her, but she just hadn't had enough time to break down her walls before everything blew up. It didn't help that Hubert made a habit of inserting himself into every conversation they had. However, she knew Edelgard respected Byleth very highly, and Byleth was banking on that respect to try and help her to see reason now.

Dimitri was another one she was worried about; the way he'd become so intense in Rhea's chambers made her wonder if he'd

picked up on Solon's comment about senseless tragedies and connected it to Duscur. She had seen him give terse explanations to his Blue Lions on the way down as if they were readying for battle which, perhaps, they were.

Sayori was actually most worried about Rhea's reaction to what was about to happen. If she rejected Sothis' message, there would be a fight that could easily escalate into a full war. Out of everyone at the monastery Rhea was the least approachable for Sayori, mostly because of her constant duties as Archbishop. It meant that she couldn't be sure how she would react to so many revelations at once—especially those so close to her heart.

Byleth finally stepped forward from where she'd been talking to someone—Seteth, maybe—and strode up the stairs towards the throne. The crowd quieted almost immediately and she sat down in silence, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. Rhea's hands rose to her chest as if she were praying.

When she opened her eyes and began to speak, Rhea's hands fell limply to her sides.

"First of all," Byleth began, "you all need to know that I know about far more than just those infiltrators. I know the truth about the origins and natures of Crests. I know the truth of the fate of the progenitor god. I know the truth of things that only you each know as well—" She pointed at Dimitri. "I know that you lost your sense of taste after the Tragedy of Duscur." As his brow furrowed, she pointed next at Mercedes. "I know that Jeritza is in truth your long-lost brother, Emile."

"What?" Mercedes gasped.

Pressing on, Byleth turned to Lysithea. "I know that you have a shortened lifespan because of your two Crests, forced on you by Imperial mages that were in truth agents of the same group as our infiltrators!" Lysithea paled and reeled back with a squeal, and the crowd roared.

"A shortened lifespan?" Hilda asked beside Sayori. "That's what she's always meant about needing to work hard for her parents!?"

Finally, with a commanding thrust of her arm Byleth singled out Edelgard. "That same group was the one that experimented on you and all of your siblings, destroying them all and granting you the Crest of Flames!"

"How?" Edelgard almost shouted over the arguments and shrieks of the crowd, obviously stricken. "How do you know this?"

"Silence!" Seteth somehow managed to call out over the crowd, bringing the volume down a good deal. "Professor, explain yourself at once!"

"Ever since just before I arrived at the monastery, I have had visions of a young girl speaking to me, telling me things I had no way of knowing. It was only recently that she told me the truth: that she is the remnant of the progenitor god Sothis, placed in me when I was born as her Crest Stone."

"What is this heresy?" Catherine demanded, stepping out of the crowd. "The goddess is not a child, or a shade! Archbishop—"

"Catherine, please," Rhea said quietly. There were tears running down her cheeks. "Let her finish."

Catherine was visibly taken aback. "A-as you wish, my lady."

"Many eons ago," Byleth spoke softly, voice carrying through the chamber regardless, "the progenitor god came to Fódlan, and shared her gifts with its people." She launched into the same story Byleth had told her months ago, which had in turn been told to her by Rhea in a previous Loop. She skimmed over some parts, such the Ten Elites being Nemesis' allies, but started into the truth about Sothis, the Agarthans, and the Nabateans. When she reached Nemesis' murder and dismemberment of Sothis, Rhea crumpled in on herself, placing her head in her hands, although Sayori thought

she might have been the only one to notice, as everyone else was caught on more obvious issues.

"Wait," Sylvain of all people interrupted, "so you're saying the Sword of the Creator was literally made from the creator?" He held up his own Lance of Ruin. "Does that apply to all of the Relic Weapons?"

There was a fresh outbreak of murmurs and gasps after that, with Catherine especially recoiling in shock. "No," Byleth said, "the other Relic Weapons weren't created from her, but they were created from the other Nabateans, when Nemesis attacked them at the Red Canyon—"

"So I'm carrying around one of these people's spines, or something," Sylvain carried on, more bitter than Sayori had ever seen him. "Wonderful. But the really important part, the part I think a few of us have caught onto already: Crests derive from the same thing?"

Byleth took another deep breath. "They do."

"And how does the goddess feel about that?" Sylvain challenged her.

Byleth's mouth twisted. "Have you already guessed everything I will say?"

"No, but I think I can see where she's going with this. Just to be clear, I do believe you on this—really—and the logical outcome of all this is that Sothis isn't too happy about her children's blood being used to decide who rules the land. Am I right?" Sayori's mind flashed back to Miklan, one of the few people Byleth hadn't been able to save with foreknowledge, and she understood exactly why he was suddenly so invested in this.

Byleth bowed her head slightly. "She does feel very strongly that the hierarchy built on Crests in Fódlan has been a grave misstep."

There was a moment of utter silence through the hall, until it was broken by a low chuckle. "Truly," Hubert spoke for the first time, "this

is the most incredible thing I've heard in quite some time. The goddess herself is supposed to have been reborn in a random mercenary, only to tell us that our entire society has been led astray? If nothing else, this is...deeply entertaining. But there is only one person whose opinion matters here, I suppose."

"Yes," Catherine agreed, face set. "Archbishop Rhea, please, do away with this liar!"

Rhea shook her head fervently, almost frantic. "Please, no, no, I can't—do this—"

"Professor!" Dimitri called out as the crowd rose to argue with itself—Sayori could barely hear him over Hilda's shouts of protest and Claude's called questions of his own. "Please, Archbishop, just tell me ask this—Professor, did the infiltrators cause the Tragedy of Duscur?"

Byleth only nodded.

It was then, finally, that all hell broke loose.

Aureate Sun: Part Six

—

The two fencers raised their swords and began with a few quick feints and darts, circling each other and raising little clouds of sawdust off the floor. The training grounds were well lit by the torches they'd set up before getting started, in spite of the pitch darkness outside. Finally, one of the fencers lunged in a more daring attack and the match started properly. For a few rapid maneuvers, they raced through attacks and counterattacks.

Sword crashed against sword in a pair of equally matched swings, but one was faster than the other in disengaging. The sharper of the two, a wickedly curved and almost segmented thing, swung out to

the left before twisting back in toward the other, normal sword's wielder. It jerked oddly in its path to aim straight for his heart—and then stopped just before piercing his clothes.

"The Crest activated again," Sayori panted, slowly lowering the fearsome blade. "I could...feel it aiming towards your, uh, vitals. It especially responds to the sword, I guess? It usually doesn't activate when we're just training!"

"I think I know what you mean," Dimitri answered, wiping sweat off his forehead. "I can feel something similar when I wield Areadbhar now, a connection to my Crest that...thrums within me, when I hold it. And, well, I suppose we know why that connection exists now." He looked vaguely ill at the thought.

It had been about a month since Byleth had told all in the Holy Tomb, and life at the monastery since then had been...eventful, to say the least. Within days of Kronya and Solon's executions, the other Slitherers throughout Fódlan had presented a unified front and announced a "defensive alliance to fight the heretical Central Church" across all three nations. In practice, it meant that most of the continent fell into chaos, as supporters of the Central Church fought against the Slitherers' supporters and troops.

Garreg Mach had had a serious crisis unto itself for the first few days after the events of that night as well. The Blue Lions had very nearly marched off to war right there and then, if it hadn't been for Ashe pointing out that they didn't actually know where or how to fight the Slitherers. Rhea had eventually, reluctantly accepted that Byleth was telling the truth after a private meeting where Byleth had revealed more personal information she knew about the Nabateans, and had agreed to try and reform the Church once the Slitherers were destroyed. Edelgard and Hubert had retreated to her room for almost a full day before emerging and having an interesting meeting of their own with Byleth—apparently, the Flame Emperor had appeared in full regalia to agree to support their cause, on the condition that freedom of religion was allowed throughout the Empire after the war. Byleth had been the most exuberant Sayori had ever seen her that

day; she'd finally succeeded in bringing the entire monastery together onto one side.

But that only meant that the war began in earnest for them sooner than what Byleth had described as Baseline, and with less advance notice. All three nations were engulfed in internecine warfare, some less so than others; what made matters worse was the fact that the Slitherers could potentially wipe an entire city off of the map with their Javelins of Light. Because of this, the monastery hadn't made any aggressive moves yet and had only had to fight off a few scattered Imperial forces so far. Instead, they were in the process of building their strength for a surprise assault on Shambhala as soon as possible to end the existential threat that the Javelins posed. Lord Rodrigue had somehow managed to smuggle Areadbhar out of Cordelia's Fhirdiad and deliver it to Dimitri by a lone rider two weeks ago, for instance, while the entire Golden Deer house had accompanied Sayori herself to Edmund territory to slay the Wandering Beast just last week. Blutgang was hers, now, and she was still getting used to it.

Sayori shook herself out of her thoughts. "As long as we honor their memories, we have to use every advantage we can, right?" They were up against giant magical mechas and nukes, apparently; they needed all the help they could get.

"Yes, of course," Dimitri said with firmer resolve. "We must end this war as quickly as possible and exterminate those accursed monsters." His face twisted into something dark, and Sayori felt a wave of pity for him again.

They'd been meeting for private training sessions once or twice a week, ever since the fateful late night he'd stumbled on her shredding training dummies with lightsaber forms. She'd been frustrated with herself over issues both from Fódlan and from home and needed to take it out somehow. They'd had a fruitful conversation about anger and how to express it, and since then they'd used these sessions both to improve and to work on their feelings, so to speak.

She knew that he struggled with what was most likely schizophrenia, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder from the Tragedy of Duscur, and Byleth's revelations had brought those issues to the forefront for a while. He had told her about the visions he saw sometimes, the faces and voices of the dead crying out for vengeance, and she'd carefully talked through the emotions and stresses he felt about it all with him. Medical treatment was essentially impossible in Fódlan, but she'd done her best to give him a sort of therapy and he genuinely was doing better. It still made her feel for him each time he was engulfed by his rage, though, because she damn well knew what it was like to be overwhelmed by her own emotions.

"We should be heading out to attack them as soon as Claude returns from negotiating with Judith." And Nader, and Almyra by extension, but that wasn't something Byleth had told everyone yet. Claude's true heritage was one of those secrets that might have caused the unified front at Garreg Mach to break down, the same way Rhea being unveiled as Saint Seiros might have.

"Any day now, yes," Dimitri muttered. He clutched his fists and his sword quivered slightly in his grip. "You'll be glad too, won't you?"

"Me? What?" The question took her by surprise; it was a strange way to change the subject. "Will I be glad about what, going to fight?"

"To finally do something?" he answered her with another question. "I can see how you're...constantly fighting with yourself over your worries. The tensions you always hold...won't they be relieved when we can answer them on the battlefield?"

"Oh. You've...noticed, huh?" Even in spite of how busy she'd been trying to get to know everyone and help them during her time in the Loop so far for some reason her worries from home had never totally left her this time around. They hung in the corners of her mind like—not like rain clouds quite, not that again, but maybe a hint of fog. "Well, it'll help to go do something, definitely, but I'm mostly worried about everybody else, you know?"

The real long term problems never left her—how to help Monika and how to handle her childhood friend. For some reason, her time at the Monastery had brought both issues into sharper relief somehow. Maybe it was through the comparisons she could draw between it and home? Edelgard scared her sometimes in how similar she was to Monika, and all the boys had their moments where they reminded her of H...her friend.

"We will all survive," Dimitri said, thankfully completely missing her point. "We know what we'll be up against thanks to Byleth, and the goddess. To think that we've been so blessed...with her on our side, we cannot lose!"

The real Sothis was something of a sarcastic little imp from how Byleth had described her and was hardly the type to go around bestowing blessings, not that Sayori could ever tell him that. "I know, I'm sure we'll make it through"—her and Byleth both were being very careful on that front—"but it's not like ending the war will solve everything, will it?"

Dimitri blinked at her. "Nothing will ever solve everything," he said slowly, "no. Too much has," he exhaled heavily, "already happened. All we can do is go forward, for those we have already lost and for those who still depend on us."

"That's it? Just out of a sense of responsibility?" she was obliged to ask him. Sometimes it almost felt that way for her back home, too—especially when it came to her friend.

Birch.

That actually was how she felt about him by now, and it wasn't his fault—it was just that he was so completely different from loop to loop that it felt like she had to keep up an emotionally exhausting friendship with a stranger every time. "Never mind," she said suddenly, "I know exactly what you mean."

It was like how being friends with Natsuki and Yuri had been before they Activated, but worse, because at least their personalities had stayed the same from loop to loop. When Hiroaka had still been Hiroaka, he'd been...consistent in his own way. Now, she Awoke every Loop with close memories and connections to someone completely different each time, an albatross of feelings nipping at her heels every time.

"I..." they both started at the same time, and Dimitri ducked his head. "Please, you go first!"

"Oh, okay..." She'd had the sudden urge to talk about what was really bothering her—and wasn't that the darnedest thing? She'd been trying to help him and she'd run smack dab into wanting him to help her. He wasn't even a Looper, not that there was anything wrong with that, but it wouldn't be fair to him, would it?

She kept on talking anyway. "I was just going to say...I have a friend, back home, who used to be my closest companion in the whole world." Thousands of different, conflicting Loop memories of their childhoods flashed through her head for a moment. "When we grew up, though, he...changed. A lot." Sometimes he was soft and gentle, a really sweet guy. Sometimes he was awkward and a bit self-centered. Sometimes he was very much self-centered, but still a good person at heart. And sometimes, too often, he was a straight-up jerk. "And he's, uh, an important vassal of the Edmund family now, so I still have to see him a lot, but I'm really not...close to him, anymore." She just couldn't hold onto that same affection she'd once had for him. She didn't know him anymore, not really—she didn't even know his name!—and thinking about him just made her sad more than anything else.

After a moment of being lost in her own, steadily darkening thoughts, Dimitri prompted her, "But he was once your friend? Then...you should carry on in the memory of the friendship you once had. Just because he's changed now doesn't mean that friendship never happened."

"Yeah, you're right, of course," she agreed, trying to keep an edge of frustration out of her voice because she'd already decided that a long, long time ago. "But that doesn't make dealing with him any easier—ugh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, my problems are just peanuts compared to your elephants—"

"I see how they weigh on you, though," he said gently. "And these are the kinds of problems that you cannot simply solve on the battlefield—so you need to speak about these things. And I am willing to listen."

"Thanks." She gave him a grateful smile. There had been loops where she'd told all to her friend this same way and he'd actually been willing to listen. Dimitri was a good person in the same way that her friend was at his best, even though he was burdened down with issues her friend never had. It was very generous of him. "Yeah, talking about it does help, really. Thanks for listening to me ramble about it!"

She wondered briefly if it wasn't very nice of her to bother a non-Looper with a Looper's issues. There'd been philosophical debates about this before across Yggdrasil; some people felt like it was selfishly taking up a sentient non-Looper's brief and precious time existing before they reset and that that was a bad thing, while others—like a few of her fellow Looping Sith—saw it the same way but of course thought the selfishness was just peachy. She didn't agree with that basic view, though, she decided. Dimitri was her friend now, after getting to know him, and being a good friend meant treating them equally to yourself. She'd let him shoulder some of her burdens, just as she'd shoulder some of his, even if he would forget it all when the Loop ended.

"Of course," Dimitri said, "goddess knows I've rambled at you enough!" They shared a laugh. "Hm...feel like another spar?"

"Oh, definitely! More than just one—we're still only getting started!"

She really did enjoy sparring now; she'd take Yuri up on that offer she'd given to learn swordsmanship a while back. Even though it was stressful at times she was really glad that she'd had this Loop, both to help Byleth and Sothis and for the friends she had made here. They were all really great people, and she'd definitely miss them when she got back home. Once they started Looping—and she got the feeling many of them would, with the way Byleth knew them all so well—she'd just make friends with them again!

They both raised their blades again, and he quirked her an encouraging smile. She looked him in the eyes and smiled right back. The fog dissipated, just a little bit.

Aureate Sun: Part Seven

—

Shambhala was a frenzy of fire and magic.

Massive magi-technological structures sparked with raw energy, leaping to and fro on the circuits that covered them. A massive trio of Titanus mechs (that was definitely what they were, and it felt so out of place in Fódlan to Sayori) lumbered forward, another round after the previous two they'd already defeated. In her peripheral vision she could see Lysithea, Annette, Hubert, and Constance engaged in furious magical battle with a group of Agarthan mages. From behind and around her on all sides arrows flew forward from their archers hidden in safer positions. Claude and Ingrid, on wyvern and pegasus mounts respectively, soared over the closest installation to attack a command tower.

"Onwards!" Dimitri shouted beside her, and the small group of forward fighters with them charged at the nearest Titanus. Raphael slashed its arm with his massive gauntlets, while Hilda jumped into a powerful downward strike with Freikugel beside him. Catherine scored a solid blow directly to its chest with Thunderbrand, followed up by Edelgard with a seemingly less powerful side thrust with Aymr

that she spun into a Raging Storm attack that tore the automaton clear open.

There was no way in Eiken that people hitting a giant metal shell could usually break through it with bone weapons. Anime physics were awesome. At least, she thought was anime; she'd never actually recognized which Branch it was, although bits and pieces seemed familiar.

Now it was her turn to attack the next closest Titanus, and she charged with Blutgang held tight at her side. The Crest Stone, and then the entire blade, glowed as she launched her first slash, then another, then a third onto its left arm. It didn't make a dent in the metal, but the magic of the sword clearly did something to the mech's magical circuits, causing them to flash erratically. It was slow to respond, and when its arm finally came up in a counterattack, she dodged it easily with a side roll—the only hard part was keeping Blutgang from cutting her—and then hopping back to her feet out of range. In the mean time, Dimitri and Caspar made their melee attacks, strong blows onto its core that nevertheless didn't quite break it. It readied another blow and Dimitri grit his teeth, ran forward and intercepted it with Areadbhar. The strike nearly knocked the spear out of his hands and shoved him to the ground.

"You okay?" Sayori called out in worry. She readied a Physic, just in case.

"I am alright," he muttered, "but—"

The Titanus loomed over the two of them suddenly, advancing directly forward and ignoring Caspar. Sayori swung her blade up but it might have been too late, this was going to hurt—

A cluster of arrows appeared in its "head" and it froze. Sayori exhaled in relief and glanced over at Dimitri climbing to his own feet, mostly unscathed.

"I did it!" Bernadetta cheered in the distance.

Their reprieve was short-lived, though, because yet another group of Titanus rounded the corner. Everyone readied their weapons again, but it was all happening so quickly that Sayori was sure they'd get tired fast if waves of the giant mechs kept coming. It was a brutal slog, and a dangerous one; if they got tired too quickly they could easily be overwhelmed.

Then, slowly but surely the entire group of Titanus slowed to a stop, heads bowing and arms falling their sides. Sayori could have sworn she heard a computer powering down. Seconds later, a panel on one of the structures next to them hissed open and Yuri Leclerc emerged, looking smug.

"Well now, that wasn't so hard," he said with a slight, taunting smile. "Just a few fools that needed their necks sliced and a few wires broken to get those metal hulks to quit."

A ragged cheer came up from the melee group, Sayori joining in. Sure, Yuri was a little bit bloodthirsty, but he was their little bit bloodthirsty guy—oddly enough, it reminded her of her own Yuri a little bit. Most of the Officers' Academy was just as bad anyway, including Dimitri. Most importantly, the big, scary mechs weren't a problem anymore.

Now they could advance, and they did, hurrying around the same corner the Titanus had come from to run into a group of unsuspecting Agarthans. They all raised their staffs just a bit too late and found themselves on the wrong end of various stabby implements, as Natsuki occasionally called them. The process repeated a few times as they raced towards the center of the complex, where Byleth had warned them that the Javelin control center was located. Finally as they approached a massive staircase most of the delegation from Garreg Mach assembled again, Byleth at the lead. She raced up the steps and examined the complex magical inscriptions above for a moment, then started carefully taking it apart.

"It's down!" she called out after a minute, and the whole chamber rang out with cheers. Apparently in Baseline Thales was here when they attacked, and usually triggered the Javelins to fire on the underground city itself in an attempt to take everyone down with him. Thankfully this time around he was still off being Lord Arundel somewhere in the empire and hadn't had notice to try and beat them here.

The desperate race against time was only half-finished, though, and in a certain sense the second part was more urgent. That's what the cavalry wing of the force was busy doing this whole time: racing down into the depths of Shambhala to track down the Slitherers' other remaining threats—most importantly their zombified Nemesis—and destroy them before they were set off. It had been a very clever, complex tactical arrangement devised by Byleth well in advance, and—

Sayori froze, her mind suddenly latching onto that one word. Tactical...

"Tactical genius...blue hair..." she muttered to herself as Jeralt emerged at the head of the cavalry contingent nearby, roaring in triumph. Byleth raced over to him and engulfed him in a hug even before he'd gotten off the horse, but Sayori barely even noticed.

Tidbits she'd heard from their Smash Branch friends flashed through her mind, and the more she compared them the more she knew it had to be true. "Medieval setting...secret dragons...the Crest of Flames! The Fire Emblem!" she shouted in triumph before immediately realizing what she'd said and turned bright red. Thankfully, very thankfully, everyone was shouting all sorts of things at the same time and no one paid her any mind.

Was it wrong that she was almost more happy that she'd finally figured out what sort of Branch it was than from the fact that they'd won?

It didn't matter, anyway; scarcely five minutes after the battle was over and they were all heading up to the surface Claude asked her if she'd "finally spill the beans on her big secret, whatever it was." That night, she got all of the students she'd gotten close to together and told them...well, not everything, but most of it.

There was still a war to be finished, but she knew now that everything would be alright.

—

Aureate Sun: Epilogue

—

Sayori: Smiling Dreamer

After the assault on Shambhala, the threat of those who slither in the dark was ended as a unified force, but the daunting task of pacifying Fódlan remained. Throughout the following campaigns to end the anarchy across the continent Sayori became known as a diplomatic genius, and one beloved by the people. She was a key figure in organizing the eventual, renewed treaties between the three nations of Fódlan, and according to some legends she wrote them entirely on her own.

An important part of her success was the close bonds she shared with leading figures in all three nations, especially their rulers. Once the wars had ended she became an ambassador between them, conveying private information and personal news with her closest companions in Fódlan.

Even long after the Loop ended a few short years later and she returned to the Literature Club she treasured her memories of all the friends she had made, especially her training partner Dimitri.

—

Many, many Loops later...

—

Yes, it would be funny , Byleth thought firmly, *but it wouldn't be worth the risk.*

"It wouldn't just be funny, it would be hilarious!" Sothis laughed as they walked together, patrolling one of the monastery's hallways early on their second morning there. It was one of their regular tasks as a professor (joint professors, as Sothis insisted) and Byleth found he liked the regularity of it at the start of a new Loop to center him again.

She isn't physically strong enough to bear it. I'm not even sure she'd last long on the battlefield wearing the heavy armor , Byleth pointed out.

"Ugh, fine," Sothis huffed. "But still, can you imagine it? You'd only barely be able to see her inside one of those huge suits of armor since they're all too big for her!"

Byleth smiled faintly. *Alright, we can maybe have Lysithea try on a Fortress Knight suit of armor and take a picture or something—*

One of the doors lining the hall opened and a bleary Dimitri stumbled out, still in his nightclothes. He looked around wildly before spotting Byleth and gasped.

"Dimitri?" Byleth asked carefully. "Are you alright?" Sothis examined him critically, floating around him where he stood.

"You're Byleth," Dimitri said uncertainly, "but—oh, things change sometimes, that's right, I—" His gaze sharpened. "Are you, um, Awake?"

Byleth's stomach flipped and Sothis gasped. "I'm not asleep...but do you mean in a Loopy sense?" the professor asked.

"Yes!" Dimitri stepped forward, uncertain. "I suppose I have...just Activated. I didn't expect it, but..."

"You've already heard the Speech, though?" Byleth was very confused. "How do you already know about the Loops?"

Dimitri took a deep breath. "Professor, do you...remember Sayori?"

Byleth's mouth fell open.

Compiler's Commentary: For anyone who read this without being familiar with Three Houses, allow me to explain the title of this chapter. The eponymous three houses are the houses the students at Garreg Mach's Officers Academy are grouped into, like the Hogwarts Houses. But instead of personal qualities, the houses are sorted by citizenship or personal alliances. The Blue Lion House, for people from or aligned with the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus; the Black Eagle House, for people from or aligned with the Adrestian Empire; and the Golden Deer House, for people from or aligned with the Leicester Alliance. Three House's story has five "routes", one of which is the story's Part I, and the other four being the options for the story's Part II, depending on your choices, and all five routes have color-themed names. Regardless of which House you choose for Byleth to teach, Part I is White Clouds. If Byleth teaches the Blue Lions, Part II is Azure Moon. If Byleth teaches the Golden Deer, Part II is Verdant Wind. If Byleth teaches the Black Eagles, Part II is either Crimson Flower or Silver Snow, depending on another choice you make. In this loop, Byleth is teaching Golden Deer, but it isn't a Baseline run, and we've got Sayori, for whom sunshine (or the lack thereof) is a common theme. Hence, "Aureate (Golden) Sun". So now you know.

And knowing is half the battle.

The other half is extreme violence.

Until next time, my friends!

Chapter 35

35.1 - A Bug in the System, by Wookywok

(DDLC)/(Gokicha)

Gokicha ran her fingers against the blades of grass as she walked through it, the morning dew wetting her fingertips. She wasn't exactly sure how many times she had found herself back in Hokkaido by now. Ten? Twenty? Fifty bazillion?

Okay, probably not fifty bazillion.

The point still stood, though. Living through the same period of time, over and over, knowing exactly what was going to happen at every moment? It was starting to get boring. If something new didn't happen soon, Gokicha wasn't sure…

The roach girl's antennae twitched, sensing an incredibly, almost impossibly sweet scent beginning to fill the air. She hadn't expected her wish to be granted so soon, but she wasn't going to complain.

Instead, she was going to follow that smell.

The trail of the saccharine aroma had led Gokicha into this kitchen, which she was currently observing from atop the fridge. There was a pink-haired human girl with an apron at the counter, standing at a tray of… *somethings* , probably something edible, that was the source of the scent. She was squirting something onto them, something almost unbelievably pink.

Dear *god* it smelled good.

...Maybe it wouldn't hurt to ask for a tiny bit?

Natsuki smiled as she piped pink frosting onto the last cupcake. While she didn't consider this batch among her absolute best work, it

was still coming out pretty damn good for a Null Loop, and a fleshy one at that. All that was left now were the sprinkles - which, if she wasn't mistaken, were in the cabinet next to the fridge…

The pinkette's eyes practically caught fire. There was a cockroach crawling down the fridge.

In the span of roughly four seconds, Natsuki grabbed a nearby magazine, rolled it into a tube, and batted the bug hard enough that it flew all the way to the other side of the room and punched a hole through the screen window, because this loop apparently ran on wacky anime logic.

She sighed. She was gonna have to let Yuri know they had a pest problem.

Gokicha lay dazed, flat on her back, in a small bed of pink roses. The last minute had been a bit of a blur, but she was *pretty* sure she had just been swatted. Hard.

The more things changed, the more they stayed the same, she supposed.

35.2 - Crashing Into Your Day, by Shieldage

(DDLC)/(Crush Crush/Hush Hush [not Looping])

Sayori woke up to find herself scratching at the rope holding her to the ceiling. She hated loops that started like this. She tried reaching into her pocket, but it was inaccessible. Her frantic pinging was followed by a single quick response. While she guessed this meant Monika was Awake and Anchoring, Sayori's vision was already starting to go dull around the edges.

Suddenly something burst through the window in a shower of glass. The motorcycle left tracks across her bed and slammed into the wall, narrowly missing her swinging feet. A large crack ripped its way

upwards from the crash site, stretching across the ceiling until it reached to where her Unawake self had secured the rope in place. She fell to the ground, gasping for breath in a rain of chunks of broken plaster.

As the room swimming around her started to regain clarity, she tore herself free of the rope. Some part of her unconscious mind was focused on the phrase: "suicide attempt CRUSHED!"

After unsteadily sliding down from the surprisingly intact motorcycle, Sayori's very pale and short friend MC, who she knew this Loop as 'Marshmallow Chibi', walked towards her and helped her to her feet.

Monika frantically burst into the room through the door. Collecting herself, she raised an eyebrow at the casual destruction. A frown crossed her face as she tried to place the home branch of the visiting non-Looper by reviewing Hub Loop backups. The person in front of her was decidedly too small to be an incarnation of Gozer...

"Thanks...for saving me." Sayori stammered out.

Shrugging, Marshmallow Chibi pulled the helmet from their head and handed it to her alongside the keys to the motorcycle.

Sayori staggered to the bed and half-sat, half-collapsed, avoiding the worst of the scattered debris. She eyed the helmet and the very out of place motorcycle - both of which, she only now noticed, were the same shade of pink as her hair at full vibrancy. "Er...thanks for the gifts too? They're very pretty."

Marshmallow Chibi beamed in happiness as the two leads of the Literature Club shared a very confused glance.

35.3 - Sayo-yori, by Awesomedude17

Many, many iterations ago

Sayori played with a yoyo and saw it as herself. An object with ups and downs built into its very design.

She honestly could say it was her favorite toy of all time.

Not so many iterations ago

Sayori practiced tricks with her yoyo and had gotten pretty good at some of the basic stuff. Still, she wanted to push the envelope and prove her skills for all to see.

She tried to swing it over her shoulder.

The others were quick to notice her frantic slamming of the desk as the yoyo was wrapped around her neck in a constricting manner.

Now

Sayori was reading a book she recently picked up called *The Colour of Magic* that she got engrossed in. She knew for a fact that she'd have to meet this Rincewind someday.

And then a drugged up Yuri smashed through the door, with Natsuki screaming as she flew by. With a deft flick of her wrist, she brought out a yoyo and spun it impeccably fast before swinging upwards, grinding the object against Yuri's temple, knocking her out.

"Gee, thanks. I'm gonna need to have a chat with Tzeentch later for deciding to try that on Yuri." Natsuki rubbed her sore head.

"Mmm hmm." Sayori nodded before Monika ran in, wondering what just happened.

35.4 - Anxious Thoughts, by BlackOmochao

(DDLC)/(Gurumin: A Monstrous Adventure)

Puku Awoke to find himself in unfamiliar surroundings, and in an unfamiliar body…

Glancing around at the somewhat messy room, and then at his pale skinned hand, the Looping monster-kid-turned-human-kid hummed, before staring up at the ceiling, ' *So…this is one of those changes Parin mentioned could happen…* '

"Puku! Are you up yet!? It's time for school!" the voice of a woman called from outside the bedroom door.

Puku's memories told him this was his mother, for this Loop at least, and that he did indeed have school.

A tired sigh escaped the green-haired boy's mouth, before he called back, "Yeah, I'm up! I'll be right down!"

Puku was in an almost dream-like state as he walked through the crowds of human teenagers, bustling about in their daily school lives, the Looping monster wasn't sure how to feel about this current repositioning of his place in the world, or all the differences he was seeing from his base world.

' *Is this one of those 'Fused Loops?'* ' the Looper thought to himself, glancing from the plaster walls of the school's halls, to the plastic sliding doors that led to the classrooms; he noted all the strange looks the humans were sporting, and how they paid so little attention to everything going on around them, in favor of their own little bubbles of reality.

' *Not like I have any right to criticize anyone in that aspect,* ' Puku grit his teeth, recalling his Baseline actions, and how he had almost doomed everyone in his blind pursuit of revenge, ' *How could Parin just forgive me so readily? How can she still consider me her friend after all that I did…?* '

This wasn't the first-time thoughts of doubt had pulsed through the monster-boy's head, and it likely wouldn't be the last. No matter how

many times his Anchor assured him of how she genuinely considered him her friend, he still couldn't get rid of that lingering doubt that she was hiding at least some bits of resentment towards him…

"Hey, watch where you're going!"

"Oh…" Puku snapped himself out of his trance, seeing the boy had bumped into, "I… sorry."

"Ug, whatever; just watch it next time!" the boy scoffed, before walking away with, Puku presumed, his friends.

' *I shouldn't get so lost in thought…* ' the green-head internally scolded himself, rubbing the back of his neck anxiously, before he glanced towards the clock on the wall, and sighed, ' *Also; I really need to get to class.* '

Going to class had been, to Puku at least, a rather uneventful experience; he had spent most of his classes dwelling over his own thoughts once more, and none of his teachers seemed to notice, or possibly care, enough to call him on it.

Also, as his memories told him; Parin was one of his classmates, and his 'best friend,' but she, unfortunately, was not Awake, so he could not attempt speaking to her about any of the thoughts pulsing through his head.

Not that he was sure he would, even if she was Awake…

Class was now over, and the Looper was planning to just head back to his 'home,' and possibly just try to sleep through the rest of this Loop so he could get back to his real home faster, though his unAwake friend had other plans.

"Come on, Puku!" Parin urged as she pulled her friend along through the halls, "You promised you'd join my club!"

"Fine, I'm coming!" the green-haired boy relented as the orange-haired girl continued to pull him, "You can release my hand, I won't run away!"

"Not buying it!"

Puku released what felt like his hundredth sigh today and allowed his unAwake Anchor to continue pulling him along.

Eventually the pulling came to a stop, and Puku found himself looking at a door, leading to one of the many clubrooms, "Literature Club…?"

"What, no!" Parin quickly protested, pulling Puku one door further down, "We're in the Monster Hunter club! We search for evidence of fantastical beasts! Not read boring stories!"

Puku stared blankly at the girl, thinking to himself on the irony of Parin leading a 'Monster Hunter club,' and wanting him to be part of it…

"Hey, I heard that!" a short pink-haired girl growled, having come out of the Literature Club's door, "Did you just call our Literature Club boring!?"

Parin ignored the yelling girl, opening the door to her own club, "Come on, Puku, let's discuss your joining of the club inside."

"Hey, don't ignore me!" the pink-haired girl raged, flailing her arms around.

'This Parin seems a bit more…obnoxious, than the one I know,' Puku couldn't help but think to himself, before he noticed another girl had stepped out from the Literature Club's door; a taller, brunette girl, a ponytail in her hair, and green eyes, looking towards him…

Puku blinked as he looked back towards the girl…before he released a Ping.

The girl's green eyes blinked, before Puku got a Ping back.

The two continued to stare at each other for a few moments.

"Puku, come on!" Parin suddenly interrupted, grabbing the boy's arm, and sending a glare the, apparently, Looping girl's way, "That's Monika, one of the biggest snobs in this school, you don't want to associate with her!"

"What was that!? You did *not* just insult our club president!" the pink-haired girl shouted with outrage.

"Natsuki, it's fine," Monika put a hand on the pink-haired girl's shoulder, calming her down a bit, before leading her back into their clubroom, sparing Puku one last glance.

Puku kept looking back unsurely, before he was dragged into the clubroom, where he would be met with Parin rambling about how much she hated those 'Literature Club snobs' instead of anything about 'Monster Hunting.'

He really hoped either Parin would Wake up soon, or the Loop would end soon.

Though, he would like a chance to maybe talk with that Monika girl before then, if to just speak to another Looper…

35.5 - Snake Time Travel, by Awesomedude17

(DDLC)/(Rick and Morty)/(Metal Gear)

"So basically, that's what happened in the latest expansion?" Monika inquired as she sipped her peppermint mocha enjoying the rare time she went through Christmas.

"More or less." Rick replied, sipping from his flask.

"Well, I suppose your *daughters* will be doing their own thing once they Loop." Monika replied with air quotes on daughters.

"Wait, daughters?" Morty asked as he came in.

"Oh geez. Now I gotta explain what that's about. Thanks Monika."

Monika would've shrugged if it weren't for Solidus Snake appearing out of nowhere with dual blades in hands.

"What the-"

And then Solid Snake appeared in between the two.

"Stay behind me if you want to live. Something tells me you screwed with the space time continuum."

And then Liquid Snake appeared, and then multiple copies of the same three appeared en masse.

"Morty!" Rick shouted.

"I-uh... I-"

"You painted a target on our backs by giving those Snakes a figure to unite against. This wouldn't have happened if you stayed in the fucking car!"

Monika judo flipped a copy of Solidus right before stomping her heel on his back. "So what now?"

"We go to Snake Planet and hope time travel's possible so we can fuck up time travel even worse so those testicle cops fix this shit."

"And if it isn't?"

"I dunno... our future selves do it for us, or something?" Morty replied.

"Let's just go, and stay in the fucking car until we're nice and ready to get out." Rick shouted as the three rushed to the car.

The three shot up the Snake scientists and looked over the time machine.

"Damn it! It's not finished. Do you know how hard it is to use Snake math, Morty?"

"Ge-ne-tics..." One copy of Liquid Snake said before Morty shot him in the head.

Afterwards, future Rick, Morty and Monika came into with crude snake outfits and time travel bracelets.

"Here you go. Stay in the car, Morty." Future Monika said.

"What's with the arm sling?" Past Monika noted.

"Solidus Snake struck it with a bokken." Future Monika clenched her non-broken arm.

"Hey what happened to your eye?" Past Morty asked.

"Man, fuck you." Future Morty replied.

"Wow! Rude!"

"Morty, shut the fuck up and put these on." Past Rick said.

The various Snakes were in open fist fights and gun fights. Summer and Beth were shooting up every Snake imaginable, regardless of friend and foe.

Rick, Morty and Monika entered the scene, and as soon as Monika got out, she got hit in the arm by Solidus holding a bokken. Just as her future self said, her arm got broken by the strike.

"Okay, I'm done with anything involving Metal Gears." Monika said as she kicked Solidus in the face.

And then all the Snakes still alive froze up and shouted in pain before fading away.

"Well, that's done thanks to the testicle cops." Monika said. "I'm gonna splint up my arm and put it in a sling now." Monika said as she walked to the garage.

Once Monika nursed her broken arm, she saw Rick and Morty come into the garage, holding snake skins and some parts.

"So your future selves came in with future me to tell you to go back in time, didn't they?"

"Yep," Rick replied.

"Alright. I will say this. I officially am done with Snake; Solid, Liquid or Solidus."

"Yeah yeah. Merry fucking Christmas, Monika."

35.6 - " Tea Time", by Venku

(DDLC)/(Persona 4)

Sayori Awoke. Gathering her thoughts, the first thing she did was to send a Ping. Deep meditative breaths to help center herself were started while she awaited for a response. Five responses greeted her inquiry. One eyebrow was lifted as she paused. "Guest loopers," she mused before slowly leaving the house.

Not seeing MC outside waiting for her was different but not worrying. "Variant Loop," she replied with a pause, pulling an apple out of her backpack. Nothing else was thought of as she picked out a book from her Pocket and began to read while on her way to school. It

was one of the treatises Twilight did concerning Magic and the Multiverse and there were some things which were confusing.

Entering the club room to see who else was there, she paused as she heard whispers inside.

"Aw. C'mon Naoto! They have a cooking stove here. Surely they wouldn't mind if I whipped up a batch of cookies!" she heard a male voice speak.

"Kanji-kun! We're guests here in this Branch," a woman with a rich alto responded. "Shouldn't we wait until we see whom the local Anchor is?"

"Anchor?" the man added with a bit of a small grunt. "Pfft. Fine. Whatever. Freakin' bullshit though because the stove is just TOO CUTE…"

At that bit Sayori opened the door and paused as she looked at the two who spoke. Apparently the person who was supposed to replace MC this loop was a taller man with dark black hair. Broad shouldered with a well defined physique, he wore the uniform jacket draped over his shoulder.

Standing next to him was a smaller woman dressed in a two piece suit. Her close cropped hair barely extended past her shoulders, and framed her face. Though the suit was something one of the male teachers would be wearing, her body was definitely not male. Internally Sayori sighed as she hoped Natsuki wouldn't be jealous of this person.

"Hi!" Sayori greeted the two visitors. Instantly the Face of the Literature Club smiled as she looked at both of them. "I can tell by your speech that time may be a bit off for you. Am I correct?"

"Uh...uh yeah." the man replied as he dropped the jacket and began to speak. "It seems like..ah hell. Yeah we're Loopers as well"

The other woman, this Naoto, sighed as she looked back at Sayori. "My apologies. Normally we'd have a different passcode used in case we're in our baseline loop"

"Right. But c'mon. She just outed herself too!" Kanji griped as he paused for a moment. "Alright. Damn that seems like something a "Moronji" as Rise-san would say huh." His next words caused Naoto to facepalm. Looking upward at the tree, he replied "Hey you stupid tree! I don't like being forcibly reminded I was a dumbass! Got it?"

Sayori laughed with Kanji's response. "It's ok. We're used to variants as well. One of ours is usually the victim of variant loops" she added. Clearing her throat, she added "I am Sayori of the Looping Literature Club. Our anchor as well as the other members will be arriving soon, if you want to hold off on introductions?" The two visitors nodded her head. She paused as she addressed this 'Kanji'. "And your friend's right. Monika, Yuri or I wouldn't care if you used the stove to bake. In fact..." her stomach growled at the thought. "But our fourth member might beat you on the head repeatedly with her Bakabane."

Sayori, while personally thinking that Natsuki's kanabo name was cute, had seen her utilize the weapon numerous times. For the sake of politeness to the new visitors, the Vice President of the Looping Literature club figured one warning might be sufficient. Anything else would be at the hands of their resident baker.

Kanji's sheepish response as well as Naoto's laugh let her know the implied warning and greeting were well received.

To Kanji's benefit, when Natsuki arrived she didn't immediately smack him on the head for messing with her stove. She did, however, glare and mutter at him while checking to be sure it still was at the right settings.

When she was satisfied the "idiot" didn't mess with her stove, Natsuki joined the others around a small table. Yuri had already broken open one of her reserve tea stashes from when she visited

Iroh in a Loop and was already pouring tea into six separate cups. Sayori was idly doodling on a notepad while Monika was engaged in chatter with the blue haired woman.

Once Natsuki sat down, the blue haired woman cleared her throat. "I do apologize," she began softly. "But if this is the same Looping Literature club I heard about…" and at this the four Dokis lifted their eyebrows as Naoto turned her gaze to Sayori. "...is your animosity with those of my Branch related to the Kirijo group or everyone from Amala?"

"Oh yeah!" Kanji chimed in, removing the glasses from his nose. "It's a big deal with the Anchor even letting us know when he checks on us that..." and Kanji cleared his throat. "If you ever meet the Peach haired one, do give a better impression than Kirijo-san's initial."

Sayori's ears turned red for a moment as she idly touched her fingertips together and went "Ehhehhe." Meanwhile Monika just idly sipped her cup of tea while Yuri and Natsuki witnessed the exchange.

After some time passed, Sayori responded. "That depends. Do you utilize your same powers as that..." she paused, looking for the right words.

Naoto's eyes widened for a moment as she bowed in a formal apology. "Ah! It makes sense now…"

"I'm con-OOF..." Kanji began before Naoto elbowed him. She took over the response as she addressed Sayori. "Our Senpai, the one who is the leader in our Baseline, utilizes his powers by smashing a representation of the Tarot card. Another group utilizes the same ability by ripping a proverbial mask off their face. Two other groups just crush their fist in a gripping motion. Only the Kirijo Group utilizes the method which you find deplorable due to your Baseline, I assume?" she finished.

With a small nod of agreement from Sayori, Naoto continued. "Then please accept my apology for my brusqueness and rudeness. I will relay back to our Anchor the reason for your display of pique."

"What did you **do** , Sayori?" Monika whispered as the two visitors conferred for a moment.

"A lady has to have some secrets...heh. But this..." Sayori shrugged. "If they're not all like that branch..." Monika paled slightly as she looked at her second's eyes. The golden tinge against the irises began to slowly fade.

After that brief interlude, the remaining introductions went rather smoothly. Even though Naoto and Kanji were still slightly nervous around Sayori, the intermediate group were having a relatively civil discussion.

"I have to ask" Monika commented as she took a sip of her tea. "This is the first time I think I've ran into anyone from Amala. What is your baseline like?"

"That depends." Naoto responded. She nodded to Kanji. "For our baseline we investigate a serial killer that throws people into the TV."

"Excuse me, you said throw into the TV?" Yuri asked. While the group was still getting a generalized feel for each other she had pulled out some needlework and thread. A new hobby she had picked up when she last visited the Hellsing manor, surprisingly at the encouragement of Alucard. What surprised her even more was that Kanji had his own supplies. Yuri, Kanji and Natsuki were currently in a three man group, working on needlepoint and cross stitch.

"Uh huh!" Kanji commented. "See from what Senpai...that's Yu Narukami. Sometimes he's called Souji. Great guy. About my height with close cropped hair. Anyway what Senpai said is that the TV is like a gateway or some shit between our world and the Midnight

Channel. Uhh..." he paused as he cursed after stabbing his finger. "Naoto, what did those Phantom Thieves call the Midnight Channel?"

"Gateway to the collective unconscious. Don't worry, I'll take over." Naoto responded affectionately. Taking a sip of her own tea, Naoto continued. "This Midnight Channel, which manifests as Mementos, Monad Mandala and other places in our Baseline connects the collective unconscious with the sea of souls. Does anyone here know of the Sea of Souls or that reference?"

Yuri nodded her head. "I've...heard of the phenomenon. A man who is like a father to me went to school to study psychology. One of the leading theories when he was in school is that according to Jung that there are components to a person. Their ego, or sense of identity. A personal unconscious which will shape that person and is an exchange from their experience and the collective unconscious stimuli which shapes." She took a small sip of her tea, biting back the fact Alucard referenced it as a load of bunk.

Naoto nodded her head. "A Persona, or a mask that they adapt to deal with the stimuli which they face, is when someone manages to suborn their will and realize that they have to overcome their base nature. Shadows are when a person gives rise to their base nature. Our baseline..." she paused for a moment. "Amala has two separate facets. One branch is where Mankind is always under battle from external forces. Angels and demons would use the souls of man as their army."

"But apparently..." Kanji interjected. "Our baseline, the other part of Amala, started off when the two assholes who would have pushed this battle got their asses kicked! So instead of this apocalyptic crap we just gotta deal with murders, death cultists and other rude people!"

Natsuki blinked. "Death cultists?" she asked.

"Oh yeah! That!" and Kanji nodded his head to Sayori. "The Kirijo group had to deal with death cultists which were trying to bring about

the end of the world. Their field leader wound up in Baseline becoming a great... Naoto, what was the word?"

"Great Seal." Naoto replied as she watched the interaction.

"Oh yeah. Great Seal. While I can get where it might be offensive..." Kanji paused for a moment as he took a sip of tea. "There's this one girl which had some major issues with depression in her Baseline, and as a Phantom Thief, her and Okumura-san may share your views, Sayori, but depending on the exact nature of the threat..gotta fight fire with fire, y'know?"

"Doesn't excuse it but...I'll accept she had her reasons." Sayori remarked idly. There was something else which was troubling her. "Let's say that Kirijo did her..." she growled. "Her crap. How did you and the other group deal with and get this...Persona?"

"That's...a long story." Naoto replied meekly.

"We've got time," Monika replied.

"I see." Monika sighed as Naoto and Kanji explained their 'Awakening' process. "So you had to face personal truths about yourself that you rather others didn't see. And the..." she checked her notes. "Phantom Thieves had to be forced into a position where they either had to rebel against an authority or be killed.

Kanji nodded his head. He was holding the string that Natsuki was using to knit while they were amicably talking. Surprising both the Amala looper and the Dokis, Natsuki and Kanji were chatting almost as if they were family. Save for the occasional remarks from the tsundere and the hothead, they both found something they could bond over: Cuteness. Kanji had already gifted Natsuki some of the handmade finger puppets he had in his Pocket and Natsuki shared one of her cupcake recipes.

"Yeah that's right," he replied to Monika's question. "Our Anchor...that long nose fellow..."

"Igor." Naoto corrected. She and Yuri were in a separate discussion over the benefits of revolvers, pistols and blades.

"Igor then. And what's with that name huh?" Kanji groused. "Anyway, Igor theorized that separate people required different catalysts to awaken and deal with their Ego. But the Ego had to be dealt with or..." he waved his hand. Unfortunately it interrupted the yarn Natsuki was using, causing her to miss a stitch.

"Watch it dummy!" Natsuki snapped.

"Watch it yourself, you pink haired cat!" Kanji replied. This met with a low warning growl from Natsuki and a small sigh from Naoto. "Kanji-kun..." the woman replied softly. "Remember that Koromaru-san and Morgana had to get downright physical with you."

"Aww...Naoto! I can't help it! She's a bottle of badass adorable!"

This phrase mollified Natsuki some, though her cheeks turned pink. "Keep it up and I'll wanna see your Persona buddy!"

"Sounds...obscene..." Yuri murmured languidly.

Monika sighed. "If you two are going to do that, do it in our Holodeck." she muttered. Turning to Naoto for a moment longer, she smiled. "Regardless. Welcome to the Looping Literature Club. Our baseline is more or less poetry writing…"

"...with a bad dating simulator underneath." Yuri grumbled.

Monika cleared her throat. "Right. Regardless since you're our guests here we can..work on the poetry if you like?"

Naoto nodded her head. The others had picked up that Kanji acted as the beast, or the brawn to Naoto's beauty, or brains. When queried earlier, she commented that save for variants both Kanji and

Naoto spent their quality time together. "That sounds...fine. I'll have to say Kanji might not be the best..."

"...that's ok" Sayori interrupted. "Your friend looped into the main character of our baseline. It's..." she paused. "A difficult story on that but I can share if you'd come with me for a moment? And no, Monika... it's a personal question." she addressed the last bit to Monika who looked a bit confused.

"Yeah. Before we continue this, I do believe I have some questions for Kanji as well…" Yuri commented. The purple haired beauty went to where Natsuki and Kanji were bickering, while Sayori and Naoto disappeared to a side room for the moment.

Monika sighed. "I will not pry..." she muttered, while thinking this might be an interesting loop regardless.

35.7 - "Mystery Food X / It's Cooking Time!", by Venku

(DDLC)/(Persona)

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

The person who spoke normally would not seem out of place in the classroom setting. A rather small woman of average build, her schoolgirl uniform was of a dark black with the emblem over the right breast and knee-length skirt. In fact, the only thing which might seem out of the ordinary was her close-cropped blue hair.

She was no ordinary student, however. She was Fuuka Yamagishi, Support Staff for the S.E.E.S. Looper of the Amala branch.

And she was talking to three other Loopers.

"Of course!" one of the other Loopers spoke. This woman was of average height, only slightly taller than Fuuka. With closed cropped brown hair and wearing a bright green sweater over her uniform,

Chie Satonaka was mixing ingredients into a large bowl. "We make this food all the time for the others, isn't that right, Yukiko?"

"Mmhm" the woman standing next to her confirmed. From the same area as Chie, Yukiko Amagi was garbed in her typical schoolgirl ensemble. A bright red top fitting well against her frame, as well as the black hose and schooling skirt. "You have to make the food with love, right Chie?"

"Right Yukiko!" Chie responded. The pot on the stove simmered and was making itself into a dark amber color as Chie was adding mocha coffee and instant coffee to the grounds. "What else goes into curry?"

"Oh I got it!" The last member of this quartet was of average height. Although she was more proportionate in build than the others, her schoolgirl fuku did it's best to hide the frame. Dark black blouse, ankle-length skirt, and a yellow bandana were Rise Kujikawa's preference when it came to clothing. Her auburn hair was pulled into a ponytail as she added. "Be sure you add the flour for the roux. And the seasonings! Gives it the spice of life!"

The seasonings, the roux, and the other flavors went into the bubbling pot on the stove. Enjoying the group camaraderie while this pot was cooking, none of the four Loopers were aware of the pending disaster.

Natsuki Awoke and sent out a Ping, as part and parcel of her standard response when awakening. While accessing her loop memories, and internally sighing when she realized it was a standard loop, she paused. Seven responses. "This should be interesting," the resident Tsundere of the Looping Literature Club replied.

Approaching the Club Room, which was the unofficial nexus for the Literature Club, she paused. There was a strange, offensive odor in the air. "Aw if the Tree is making a Ratsuki pun or a garbage pun

I'mma just go read," she growled. Her speed picked up, intending to find and hopefully remove the source of the odor.

BOOM!

The reverberating shockwaves almost threw Natsuki off of her feet as the door to the club blew off its hinges. This caused the Doki to run inside. Already wondering if there was a violent Looper which would explain her multiple pings, she had already shifted into a fighting stance.

Instead of finding enemies she could pummel, all she could see was what looked like brown goop sprayed everywhere. The walls were coated with the sludge, the windows, and most telling of all were the four others standing there coated with the sludge.

"I thought you said you knew what you were doing?" the shortest of the girls wailed. Natsuki only noted that the woman's hair was blue. About the only thing she noted as she was just standing there, mouth agape at the carnage.

"Wait wait" the woman in the now muddy red top interrupted. "We're those who are adrif.."

"SAVE IT!" Natsuki barked as the four other women froze. "JUST SAVE IT. You...you destroyed the stove! What were you making?"

"...curry?" the auburn haired woman commented. "We...just thought it'd be a nice gesture."

Natsuki heard no more. Though she was quite annoyed with the scene before her, it took her a few moments before she could even respond.

Before she would continue, there was a small whisper as she asked a question. "Are you all loopy?" Natsuki asked, her voice calm.

Seeing the other four women nod, the resident tsundere spoke in a quiet whisper. "Alright. I really don't care what or how you do it but do try to clean up hm?" she replied before disappearing outside. "I need to gather myself, then we're going to have some lessons. I don't know what you thought you were doing, and I don't care what your plans were. When you destroyed my kitchen, you automatically signed up for my cooking lessons." And with that, Natsuki left the room, leaving the other Amala branch members with wide eyes and stained clothes.

Some time had passed as Natsuki walked back in. The room was making progress as each of the others were doing their best to clean up. Their outfits having been cleaned, Rise and Fuuka were working on scrubbing the walls while Chie was working on the ceiling. Yukiko had her hair in a bun, and was busy scrubbing the floors clean.

Recognizing one of their uniforms, Natsuki paused. "Amala branch loopers?" Receiving a confirmation nod, Natsuki continued as she moved most of the tables to the side. "Already know of your Persona ability. Naoto and Kanji were already here before and let us know." A small shake of her head. "But they didn't say how bad you all were at cooking." Ignoring the looks of hurt feelings, Natsuki made four separate stations with a table and a portable burner on each. "Alright. We're going to have Fun now" she added, facing each of the others with a toothy grin.

Fuuka gulped nervously.

"Do we even know what's going on?" Sayori asked as she and Monika had Awakened elsewhere and had felt the shockwave.

"No clue. The code showed damage from the club room but that's it." Monika replied as she opened the door. After not moving, Sayori gently nudged her friend before looking over her shoulder, curious as to what's inside.

The club apparently had all the tables moved to the side and four cooking stations were installed. At each station was a pot and an assortment of fresh vegetables. Each station was manned with a cook who was stirring contents in a pot, their gaze focused upon what was going in it.

Walking between them was Natsuki. The pink haired one had a hat on her head and a chef's apron on, both feminine and both practical.

"Listen up!" she growled as she walked between each woman. "I don't care what you called that crap you were making when I came in here. Don't care if your idiots in baseline can eat it. When you're in *my* kitchen, you're going to cook something passable. We're going to do this and do this until it's right!" When a loud hissing sound was heard behind her, Natsuki turned her head to the offender. "Satonaka! What did I say about adding Mocha to your curry?"

One of the loopers, the woman with short brown hair let loose a yelp when Natsuki turned on her. "Uh...not to?" Chie Satonaka responded in a meek voice.

"Then why are you adding it?" Natsuki asked.

"Because I like..." the other woman began.

"WRONG! Honestly it's like talking to a brick wall here" Natsuki added in a bit of a huff. Sweeping her arm out to where there was a giant disposal pain, she added. "Dispose of the curry and start again!" She interrupted Chie's attempted rebuttal with a promise. "Empty the curry or spend this Loop running around the school nonstop."

Wisely, Chie said nothing as she emptied her prior cooking project. Nodding her head, Natsuki went to one of the other pots, this one in front of Fuuka.

"Very good Fuuka" Natsuki responded with a calm tone. "See what I said about being mindful of the spices? It's like computer

programming. You've got to be sure your source code isn't corrupted."

This comment caused the other woman, this Fuuka to beam. "Thanks Natsuki!"

Rise and Yukiko were collaborating on their collective cooking and heard what Natsuki mentioned. "But I thought that spices just added flavor?" Rise asked, a bit confused.

"Honestly and you call yourself an Idol" Natsuki replied in a bit of an irritated voice. "You tell me you go to rehearsal and just butcher the lyrics without memorizing it?"

The exchange continued with none of the room's occupants having noticed Monika or Sayori. "Let's come back later.." Monika commented to Sayori who nodded her head. "I'd hate to interrupt what might be a good start."

Quietly, as Yuri had not arrived yet, both ladies closed the door and turned around. "I'll spend some time with Yuri," Sayori replied as she went off in one direction. "Stay nearby in case Natsuki is wondering where everyone's at?" Monika nodded her head in agreement as Sayori disappeared.

"Well, this loop should be interesting at least. Hopefully it'll taste good" Monika commented as she went into her room.

35.8 - This Was a Long Time Ago but…, by Awesomedude17

(DDLC)/(Super Mario Bros.)

Bowser looked at the 17 page document in abject confusion, and groaned once he got to the Super Crown.

"Ladies, I stopped caring about that stupid crown a long time ago. It's basically dead now. Old news."

"Yeah, but we still suffered for it because you became mainstream sexy." Natsuki replied.

"Look, I don't wanna argue about this and I'm sure you don't either, so how about I offer some moves that you could use, given you're oozing tsundere energy, and you I'll offer you...I dunno..."

"Something that doesn't remind me of Bowsette, thank you very much."

Bowser scratched his chin before snapping his fingers. "How about some beach pics of this handsome body?"

Monika snapped her fingers and then Natsuki slapped Bowser. Monika then pointed at Bowser.

"No! None of that! Shame on you!"

"Alright, fine. I think I got some spare power armor that you can use. It's in my handsome-"

"Finish that sentence and I'll find a Super Crown and use it on you."

Bowser huffed, but nonetheless agreed to not push it.

Still, figuring out what to give to Monika was really hard for the Koopa King. It just was.

35.9 - Life Sometimes Derps, by Awesomedude17

"I'm serious. Surgical steel. Never needs sharpening. Both of those are buzzword phrases that mean the knife's utterly worthless." Yuri said.

"Yeah, but they're cheap," said the walrus in the top hat.

"Oh, they're cheap then, and then they break and you replace them and they break and suddenly, it's cheaper to go with the decent

knife. Trust a girl who's handled a good chef's knife before, you will regret this purchase."

"Who are you talking to Yuri?" Sayori asked.

"The walrus in the top hat over there."

Sayori looked at the empty space, and then the strips of paper on the table.

"You're that bored that you decided to try acid, didn't you?"

"Sayori, I had to be with Barney the Dinosaur recently thanks to...you know."

"Oh...right then..." Sayori faux coughed uncomfortably.

"This isn't a healthy way to cope, Yuri. You know that, right?" Said the walrus in the top hat.

"Quiet, walrus. You're not even real."

"My point exactly."

35.10 - Where Natsuki Gets A Break (For Now...), by dancingRibbons

Monika tramped—or rather, *scuttled* into the clubroom, currently an arthropod. "I see why you don't like these loops, Nats."

Natsuki snickered. "So, you're Prawnika this loop?" She slid over to her baking area. "I'm a snail! With a pretty pink shell with icing swirls! But still rather fast and I don't think I leave any of the slime that most snails do. "

Monika—or Prawnika—sighed. "Because I'm cleaning it up after you." She then grinned. "And while doing that I peeked into the code and saw what your current name is. It's good."

"Really? Tell me! Tell me, you fucking genius!"

The two were interrupted by Sayori slamming her hands on the desk next to Monika.

"Mon, can you fix this, please?" The vice president of the Literature Club's voice sounded oily. Grease dripped down her shoulders and uniform.

"The heck? Did you take a bath in a McDonalds deep fryer?" Natsuki asked, while holding in her giggles.

"So...you're Mayori this loop, Sayori?" Monika waved her hand and spawned an anti-oil brush, which she used to start combing Sayori's blond, shiny hair—or rather, Sayori's never-ending waterfall of mayo sauce. Said mayo sauce proceeded to get on Monika's hands and uniform. "Oh. This actually might be a problem."

"You think this is a problem? I can't even feel my hair and it's weird! I even tried to cut it at home but it comes back!" The VP sighed, taking the brush, but flinched. "Wait. You're a lobster. Why are you a lobster?"

"Prawn!" Monika jokingly snapped. "And I'll fix this, but first…where's Yuri and is she affected?"

Right on cue, the door to the club slammed open and disintegrated into sawdust and splinters, followed by a foot, connected to a familiar purple-haired schoolgirl—who looked normal, but had red-and-white marbled skin.

"Yuri?" Natsuki goggled. "Did you become a Majin too?"

"Two things: first, I'm Wagyuri this loop! Second, I am not a Majin." Yuri plopped down into a seat. The seat broke. "Whoops. Also, I'm stupidly strong. Hope this carries over. Wanna train later Nats?"

"Huh?" Natsuki glanced up, then processed the question. "Sure, why not. Just don't break me." she replied, then returned to being deep in thought.

Monika waved her hand again and fixed the seat. "Not to worry, not to worry..." Hm. Where was the MC...?

"Sayori, where's MC?" She asked.

"Uh...this loop, his name's Mac Cheese, and he's in the anime club. I couldn't convince him this time round." Sayori sighed.

Then everyone jumped several feet in the air as Natsuki jumped onto the table. "I know what the pun is!"

"...what is it?" Sayori asked, lowering her lightsaber.

"It's...it's...it's Escargotski!" Natsuki began to laugh and pound the table at the same time, rolling over onto her side.

As the dawning realization swept over Sayori and Yuri, they joined in on the laughter, and Natsuki punched the air. "Yes! Yes! Finally, a pun loop where it's a fucking GOOD pun! You hear me, Tree!? Thank you! *No more shitty Nat puns!* "

The next loop...

Caratsuki grumbled in her spot on Yuri's neck. She was, after all, currently a pink diamond on a leather choker. At least it was a tasteful one that matched her wearer's ensemble.

Monika and Sayori smiled, leaning down to look at her. "So, what have we learned?" Monika asked.

"Never tempt fate...and we will never speak of this again." The gem hissed.

"You look really cute as a diamond though..." Yuri mused.

"How is never speaking of this again *mentioning it in the next fucking sentence, Yuri?!* " Caratsuki tried to move, but she ended up vibrating in place angrily.

"Oh, by the way," Monika continued. "I picked up a French dictionary a while ago, and decided to have a read through yesterday."

"So?" The diamond snarled.

"Escargot is pronounced with a *go* at the end. Not a *got* ."

Natsuki was silent for a moment.

"Well," she decided, "whenever Psyche comes to visit us next I'm probably going to interrogate her on why Yggradsil really loves taking the mickey out of me. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to try to vibrate to my room. And...probably stay there for the rest of the loop."

Stupid tree…

35.11 - Meme Enactment, by Boohoooo!

(DDLC)/(Borderlands)/(Wacky Races)/(Marvel Comics)/(Skylanders Academy)

A bunch of Loopers (and Deadpool) were huddled around a living room with a white board.

"Alright, everyone, before we go on this heist, we're gonna need codenames. I'm Eagle One. Yuri is Been There, Done That. Claptrap is Not in a Million Years." Natsuki began.

"Fuck you too, Natsuki." Claptrap pouted.

"Dastardly is I Think Monika Would Have Dibs." Natsuki continued.

"You end up tied up together ONCE..." Dastardly began before devolving into incomprehensible grumbling.

"Muttley is He's a Dog, You Sickos." Natsuki went on. Muttley did his signature laugh.

"Monika and Dastardly's friendship hasn't been established on screen yet." Deadpool mused, albeit a bit late.

"Deadpool is Slightly More Likely Than Claptrap." Natsuki nodded.

"Are you even legal?" Deadpool asked, earning him a painful Baka Punch.

"Kaos Is Hell No, Glumshanks is a Hard Maybe." Natsuki almost finished up.

"YOU DARE MOCK KAOSSSSS?!" Kaos roared.

"That's the farthest I've ever gotten." Glumshanks mused, reading Some Skylands Literature.

"And Sayori is... Eagle Two." Natsuki finished.

"Oh thank Admins." Sayori muttered.

"...Why are you all in my house?" Monika deadpanned, entering.

"We're planning a heist on The Fort Knox of Bakeries." Natsuki shrugged.

"..." Monika turned and left, not really surprised but also uncertain how to respond to that.

"HEY WAIT A MINUTE! THAT'S MY HOUSE!" Monika shouted a few minutes later, but she was already locked out.

35.12 - "Coffee and Curry", by Venku

(DDLC)/(Persona 5)

"Are you sure everything is going ok?" Sojiro asked. It was a lull between rushes and the man was checking in on his ward.

Ever since he was made aware of time stuck on repeat, there were certain traits which came out whenever Sojiro Sakura was 'Awake'. One of those traits was, as he always felt as the adopted parent of the group, looking after his daughter and her friends. He did not care that each of the kids which came into the shop were Phantom Thieves and dangerous in their own rights, nor that each were also aware of time being on repeat. They were still teenagers and in need of a strong parental figure, dammit!

"More or less." Akira replied as he was doing the dishes in the back of the coffee shop. It was a Saturday afternoon, and school was out for the day.

Out of those in this region, , only one of those was not responding as a looper. "I'm thinking we have a guest" Sojiro commented to Akira. "Would you mind telling me where everyone is?". With a small nod, Akira turned off the sink and faced the older gentleman.

"Haru stated she had a bad loop and needed to work off some issues." he began. Brewing a cup of coffee for both Sojiro and himself, he stopped the update to Sojiro until the Mocha Matari was finished. The cup was then offered to Sojiro, who nodded his approval. Enjoying the subtle spices and the blend of chocolate, Akira continued. "Her, Futaba, Ryuji and Morgana are handling any 'Palace' concerns up until the Big Bang Burger incident. Ann and Makoto are visiting Inaba and the group there with Shiho, and Yusuke is focusing more on his art this loop. Something about being the understudy of Hokusai a few loops ago. He had requested to be on standby this loop. We also made him promise not to lose track of time this Loop and eat" Akira added, forestalling Sojiro's next question.

"Hoo boy" Sojiro responded as he heard the recap. "It sounds like you all had a hell of a time. It does amaze me that you can stay so strong. Also makes me proud." he added. Even with time on standby, Akira at heart was a young man who did not receive as many compliments from most figures in this town. A small nod of thanks was given.

The door opened, interrupting their brewing discussion. In walked a young woman, standing slightly smaller than Futaba with short pink hair. Wearing the Shujin uniform and carrying a backpack over her shoulder, she looked around the room and saw it was near empty. Nodding her head once, she hopped on the nearby barstool.

"Can we help you, Miss..." Sojiro started.

"Natsuki." the woman responded.

"Alright Miss Natsuki." Sojiro replied. A small wave of his hand. "Welcome to LeBlanc. We have curry and coffee."

She wrinkled her nose for a moment before replying. "I suppose that I should give it a go. Some curry and.." she looked at the lists on the wall, a bit lost.

Sojiro interrupted. "New customer to coffee?" he asked. Seeing Natsuki's 'soso' response, he nodded. "I see. Here." as Sojiro brewed a cup and slid it over. "Guatemalan SHB. It's a medium cup with a rich citrus and chocolate taste."

Natsuki took a sip and nodded. "Not bad," she replied. "But..got any cream and sugar?"

Sojiro's left eye started twitching.

The twitching intensified with the amount of sugar and cream that Natsuki put into the cup before she nodded her head. Akira, watching this, decided to try something as he finished the fresh

batch of curry on the stove. Honey was already added as the secret ingredient. When it came time for the spice, a pinch of cinnamon was thrown in with the other ingredients.

Pouring a ladle over a serving of rice, he slid it in front of Natsuki. "Try it," he encouraged. Ignoring the woman's glare, he watched as she took a bite. Then another. "Thish...ish...good!" Natsuki responded between mouthfuls as she devoured the plate.

"So what's this batch?" Sojiro asked. He saw her response to the food and he was a bit concerned for now.

"Some apples, honey, and cinnamon." Akira replied. He turned to Sojiro and nodded his head at the raised eyebrow. Like Sojiro, Akira had a few questions about their guest. Primarily, was she the proverbial "Guest" this Loop?

While Akira walked to the door, to flip the sign to close, Sojiro cleared his throat. "Young Lady" the man replied as he leaned forward on the counter. "If I asked you about a World Tree, what would your response be?"

"So what gave it away?" Natsuki asked as she confirmed she was looping. Akira had also confirmed he was a Persona user when she asked. Surprised with the knowledge, she explained how her base branch had some Amala loopers visiting.

"Other than the fact we were missing a looper when we pinged, we didn't know," Sojiro responded. "However my baseline self had government intelligence training and you were holding yourself back in a reserved matter. I was going to ask about your age but I had a feeling it'd be a bad Idea" Sojiro responded, emphasizing the last word.

"Yeah, it would have," Natsuki confirmed. She ordered another cup of the coffee and added a lot of cream and sugar, thus rendering

Sojiro temporarily mute. Seeing Sojiro's response, she paused. "There a problem?"

"He's a coffee connoisseur," Akira replied. Dishing out another plate of curry, he took over the discussion. "Another of our baseline Loopers, Ryuji, drinks the same way you do and he always chides Ryuji about being a kid."

"That's because that much sugar is bad for you" Sojiro grumbled.

"It's too bitter though!" Natsuki responded. This had Sojiro grumble and Akira bark out another laugh.

"That's why I added those seasonings to your curry," he replied. At Natsuki's quizzical look, Akira elaborated. "The honey? Cinnamon? Things to enhance a natural sweetness."

"Yeah. Better than..." she paused. "Are you familiar with other Persona Loopers like yourselves..?" With Akira's confirmation, she nodded. "Fuuka, Chie, Rise and Yukiko came in recently and.."

"That was you?" Akira asked, surprised. Natsuki looked at him for a moment in confusion, as he began to elaborate. "Our Anchor keeps tabs of the knowledge that we gain as Loopers. Those of us with the ability to summon multiple Persona need to always 'expand' and meet new people. And he encourages others who can summon one to learn new skills to keep their Persona strong."

"So when they met with the Anchor..." Natsuki began.

"Right. Just as he's aware of another who had problems here" Akira paused. "Her name was Sayori, right?" With Natsuki's nod, he continued. "He's aware of how Sayori felt about Kirijo's group, and he did get Naoto's later message. He was also aware that you had helped the girls learn how to cook. So expect the Inaba crew if you ever go there to..."

"...shower me with affection. Got it. Well at least they'll know how awesome I am!" Natsuki struck a mock pose, which got a chuckle out of Akira. Natsuki continued. "I had a question about what's going on."

"Sorry to cut this short," Sojiro interrupted. He had disappeared to take a phone call and had just returned.

"Everything ok?" Akira asked.

"That was Futaba" Sojiro responded. "Apparently Haru sprained her ankle working on that project so they're calling it an early night. She's heading back to the house with Morgana, and both are pushing for sushi tonight." Sojiro snorted. "Got to open up soon. You need to clean the dishes and see Takemi in case Haru needs medical attention."

"I'm sorry to ask as this may be awkward," Natsuki interrupted. "But are you his son?"

"Baseline had me on probation in Tokyo for a year" Akira elaborated as he cleaned up her plate and cup, as well as the cooking pot. "Sojiro was my guardian. Didn't like me at first but I warmed up to him. That and.."

"He saved Futaba. Though not by biological daughter, she and I are like a family." Sojiro finished. He nodded his head to Akira. "Due to his baseline past he needed a person to act as a guardian here as well. He grew on me, so we act as if we're family. Sometimes the baseline has Futaba and him as a couple and then they really enjoy playing tricks on me," Sojiro clarified in a rueful manner.

Natsuki nodded. Hiding a smirk as she took a sip of her coffee, she asked "Are you seeing anyone?" of Akira.

"No"

"Interesting." Though she didn't take stock of Monika's romantic life like Sayori, she also wasn't blind. While she thought Akira's hair was a bit too unruly, she couldn't deny he had a sense of charm about him.

"Anyway, we're about to open up" Sojiro responded. "Any conversations about what you kids do needs to be kept clean."

"Got it" Akira responded. He slid a sheet of paper to Natsuki with his phone on top. "Boss's likely to ask later but, if you don't have a spot to go he knows some people. And if you have more questions about Persona, or meet the others."

"I'm set for this loop, thanks. However," Natsuki palmed the number. "I'll text you later, alright? I do have some questions, though if possible I'd rather not be fighting this loop."

Akira nodded.

Natsuki smirked. This would be an interesting Loop.

Compiler's Commentary:

35.1: Man, it sure would be awkward if Gokicha became a member of the Looping Literature Club someday. Yessir. *whistles*

35.2: Aww, what a useful little MC! So soft and squishy too~ ^_^

35.3: Yoooooo! Yoyoyoyoyoyoyoyoyoyoyo, **YO-YO, YO!**

35.4: Monster Hunting Club, eh? Keep an eye out for Rathalos I guess.

35.5: Psycho Mantis: "You…you like playing *Doki Doki Literature Club* , don't you?"

35.6: Oh hey, check out all this social linking going on…idk I don't Persona

35.7: Natsuki doesn't *enjoy* being mean to people, you have to understand, but she understands how effective pressure can be for *crushing the souls of inferior vermin* wait no that's not right.

35.8: Don't feel bad, Big B, I never know what to get Monika for our annivers-WAIT SHIT NO I DIDN'T SAY THAT OUT LOUD!

35.9: Apologies to anyone who actually has fond memories of Barney the Dinosaur, *somehow* , but I too would go to any lengths to make myself forget such a thing.

35.10: In which Natsuki tastes joy, only for it to turn into ash in her mouth. Snail-flavored ash. Oh, and WELCOME TO THE DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB INFINITE LOOPS WRITING CLUB, DANCINGRIBBONS! They're going to be a big part of the next compilation chapter. Like, at least a quarter of it.

35.11: The mission was an unconditional success. No enemy confections survived. Collateral damage was minimal, but for a group that includes Natsuki and Deadpool, "minimal" collateral damage is still rather substantial.

35.12: I haven't suddenly become a Persona expert over the last six snips, so I'm still not sure what to say here…HEY LOOK OVER THERE IT'S A DISTRACTION oh wait it already left never mind. Well this is awkward.

ALSO, I'd like to give a very impassioned thank you, AND A FIRESTORM OF MANLY GRATITUDE, to WarioBarker on TVTropes for all his work on the DDLC Loops' TVTropes page. The page itself was created by our own Masterweaver, and worked on by our own Awesomedude17, Wookywok, and Zum1UDontNo, as well as a bwburke94, and even I have done a little editing despite my general lack of ability vis-a-vis Wiki editing, but by far and away the vast majority of the work (and most importantly, acknowledging my Lemony Narrator status) has been done by WarioBarker. So from me to you, WB, I see you, and I thank you.

Chapter 36

36.1 - Mon-Ika the Octoling, by dancingRibbons

(DDLC) (Splatoon)

"Y'all know what time it is!"

"It's Off the Hook, coming at you live from Inkopolis…Square!" Monika Awoke, her lifetimes of experience letting her only mildly stumble over the unfamiliar lines.

Her co-host, a short Inkling called Pearl, gave her an intrigued look, then continued. "Check it! Here are the current regular battle stages!"

Monika manipulated the DJ console, as she processed the unfamiliar Loop memories. ' *Hm, a post-apocalyptic world? Populated by humanoids that could turn into octopi and squi…* oh *.'* She groaned.

"Yo, Earth to Monika? Hello!" A gloved hand reached in front of Monika's face, snapping its fingers. "We aren't done with the broadcast yet! But if you're feeling ill…"

"Oh! Sorry! Just spaced out, was feeling a bit Loopy." Hoping that she put the emphasis correctly, Monika registered Pearl's widening eyes. ' *Success!'* She decided to keep going. "I'm better now though, so let's continue."

The light on the camera blinked off, and Pearl turned to Monika. "Are you better Anchored now?"

"Wide Awake and feeling Loopy still," Monika replied. "Hi, I'm Monika, and I'm the Anchor for the Doki Doki Literature Club loops."

"Great! And I'm Pearl, also known as MC. Princess in Baseline. Splatoon universe Looper!" The short Inkling pulled out a smartphone and began texting. "I'll tell Callie and Marie we have a guest."

"Callie and Marie…the Squid Sisters?" Monika asked. She recalled having several of their merch items whilst Unawake.

"They're the Co-Anchors of the loop. " Pearl's phone buzzed. She hopped off the couch and turned towards the door. "Callie says to meet at 12, we don't have another broadcast until 3. I'm gonna go grab a bite to eat. You want something?"

"Coffee, if you have it."

"Vegetarian?"

Monika nodded. "How did you guess?"

"Was just asking for your preferences." Pearl opened the door. "Coffee and croissants, be back in ten!"

While her fellow looper was gone, the time-displaced Anchor took the time to look more thoroughly at her Loop memories. ' *Hm…Army defect…engineer and coder genius? Graduated at age 9?'* Monika smirked. ' *Unawake me really was something. Calamari Inkantation…ah, so* that's *what the Squid Sisters look like. Mount Nantai…met Pearl…started a band.'*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knocking on the glass. "Who's there?" she called, looking up.

A female Inkling, wearing a school uniform and jacket, waved from behind the window. Her…hair…was purple. A familiar shade of purple…

"Yuri?! You didn't Ping!"

Yuri blushed, then mouthed something. ' *Feeling Loopy. Can you let me in?'*

Monika opened the door, then rushed to hug her fellow Looper. "Care to explain, Yuyu?"

"I just Woke Up. Forgot to Ping. Now, is Nats Awake? I think we can have some fun with these tenta-"

"No, Yuri. Let me introduce you to the other loopers, and THEN you can have your fun." The currently-a-pop-idol paused, and added: "Behind closed doors."

The two DDLC loopers then jumped as Pearl cleared her throat behind them. "Yo, hate to ruin the moment, but is she another Looper?"

"Yeah. Yuri, this is Pearl, she's a Looper, don't hurt her."

"Ah, gotcha." Yuri gave Pearl a glance and a smirk, which turned into a grin. "Rapper?"

"Heck yeah!" The pop star struck a pose, which looked ridiculous with the two plastic bags. She then paused. "I'd do a rap right here, but I can't think of one right now and I don't want to drop the snacks."

"So what do you do in this loop?" Yuri asked. "According to my Loop memories, I passed a test to drop school and make my way here during school hours."

The purple-haired inkling shrugged. "I also happen to be a teenager who goes to Octo Canyon and kills octopodes, so…"

"Sweet, you're replacing Agent 4. You do basically what you do, though we have another 'event' coming up soon which involves Agent 3, me and Monika." Pearl shoved the door open and set the snacks down on the table. "It's kinda complicated. How about we talk around coffee?"

36.2 - Hobby Picking (pt. 1), by dancingRibbons

It all started as a normal day, in a baseline loop. The Dokis were eating a pizza lunch (baked by Natsuki): classic Hawaiian, pepperoni, vegetarian for Monika and marshmallow chocolate. Yuri fed Natsuki a slice of candy pizza, while Sayori cut a Hawaiian slice for the MC, who was named Damien this Loop. Monika idly stared out the window while eating her own lunch.

All was good and well.

Suddenly, during her half-trance, an idea blossomed inside Monika's head. Her eyes widened, and she shook herself out of her stupor. "Girls?"

"Yes/What, Monika?" the other Dokis responded in chorus.

"I just realized something." Monika finished her slice, and her plate dissolved into strings of code. "Remember how we promised each other to have some loops as club-bonding times?"

"Yerh?" Yuri put down her own, half-finished slice.

"Yuri, finish your food before you talk," chided Sayori.

"Shorri—sorry. Yeah, we remember that, right girls?" Yuri relented.

"Definitely. Whatcha planning now, Mons?" Natsuki asked.

"Hobbies." Monika put her hands on the table. "I say that for the next four or so loops, we try to teach each other some of our favorite hobbies."

Yuri put her hand up.

"And no," the president added, "it can't be knife making related, Yuri."

Yuri put her hand down.

"I'll spin the wheel. That'll decide the order. You guys have two loops to prepare." Monika made a circular motion with her right hand, and a wheel split into quarters appeared. Each quarter had a Doki's name on it.

"So we want to be as early as possible?" Natsuki asked.

"If you want to go first, yes." The coral-haired AI then spun the wheel four times. "Alright… looks like the order is Sayori, Yuri, Natsuki, and me."

"Um… excuse me?" Damien raised his hand. "What's all this stuff about loops?"

"It's an inside joke," Sayori quickly ad-libbed. "A loop is a week."

"And why aren't I involved?"

"Are you asking to be involved?" Natsuki chimed in.

"Nope, course not." The MC picked up his pizza slice and began munching on it again.

"Are you sure this isn't rigged so that you get to go last, Prez?" Yuri questioned, suspicious.

"Of course not! I got the wheel off the internet." Monika huffed. "So! Two loops to prepare, then we'll be presenting across four loops. Got it?"

"Got it!" everyone chorused.

36.3 - Mon-Ika the Octoling: Part 2, by dancingRibbons

(DDLC)/(Splatoon)

"So," the coral-haired Looper said, "This is what Unawake me normally uses?" Monika and Pearl were standing in the testfire area of Ammo Knights, looking at the four (currently folded) umbrellas laying in a pile in front of them.

"This type of weapon, at least." Her fellow looper picked up an arm-length umbrella, which had a trigger (!) along the handle. Pearl then handed it to Monika. "This is a Splat Brella. You pull the trigger to shoot ink. Try it!"

The visitor tentatively picked up the umbrella-shaped shotgun, and held down the trigger. Nothing came out, but there was a woosh of air which blew Pearl's tentacles back, and the umbrella opened.

"Uh…wrong trigger. That one's for the…" Pearl was interrupted by a puttering of ink as the umbrella fired itself, slowly making its way across the testfire area and leaving a trail of coral ink. It then disappeared into a puff of smoke after five seconds.

Monika stared. "Was it supposed to do that?"

"...yes. You're supposed to be able to swim in that ink, or use the umbrella as a shield. For the Splat Brella…um, hold on, let me find the guide." Pearl started rummaging in her bag.

Meanwhile, her visitor examined the umbrella. She found a second, smaller switch labeled "ink" on the side of the handle. This is probably it, she thought, and depressed the button.

Ptt ptt ptt ptt ptt ptt ptt…

Monika blinked as the umbrella shot out several "bullets" of ink in front of her, globs of thick coral-pink liquid. "I don't suppose you would be so kind to let me look through that manual you've got there?"

"Hm? Oh, sweet, you figured out how to shoot!" Pearl dropped the pamphlet, walking over. "Usually the aim of a Turf War is to cover as

much ground as you can. Walls don't count for turf, but you can swim up them for mobility and stealth. If you shoot someone enough times, they get splatted and respawn at their spawn point, which looks like a kettle at either end of the map. Each team has their own spawn point."

"What if the opposing team camps the spawn?" Monika asked, curious.

"There's a barrier around the spawn that protects that team from enemy ink. You can't hit anyone through there."

"Well…" Pearl's visitor began shooting the ground. "We can't walk through there either?"

"The barrier pushes you back." Pearl leaned against the wall. "Do you like the feel of the brella?"

"Yeah. How do I know how many hits it takes for me to splat someone?" the anchor questioned.

The native looper got up and walked in front of her. "Shoot me."

"...you respawn as well, right?" Monika depressed the trigger, and watched as the globs of ink landed on Pearl.

Who promptly exploded into a puddle of the same ink color.

"Whoa!"

...odd, it didn't seem like it hurt. Pearl hadn't made a noise.

"And that's what splatting's like. I took three hits, so that's three bullets for a kill." A figure trotted out from behind a corner.

"Pearl?" Monika gaped, then realized. "Ah, right, respawning."

"Now to teach you about specials!" Pearl clapped her hands together. "This is my favorite bit about Turf War: once you cover

enough turf with ink, you unlock a special that usually kills people, but can also help you cover more ground. Specials also refill your ink gauge to max, and some are handy for getting out of a tight situation. You need to press the right stick to activate yours."

"For Brellas, the right stick is directly on the handle, where your thumb would rest. I still don't know why it's called a right stick but isn't a stick." The rapper gently guided Monika's thumb to the button. "There should be two bars on the handle of the brella: one tells you how much ink you have left, the other shows you your special gauge and how full it is."

"So I shoot the ground, fill up my special gauge, and press the right stick?" her guest asked.

"Basically. Now, fill up your gauge," Pearl commanded. "Your special is a bit different in that it focuses more on ink coverage. It's called Ink Storm; when used, you can produce a cloud that quite literally rains ink onto the turf."

"What if it hits an enemy?" Monika wondered out loud.

"If they're already taken enough damage, they get splatted. So get inking!"

36.4 - Waspinator and the Dokis Reunion, by Boohoooo!

(DDLC)/(Transformers)

"Hey! Literature Club ladiezzz!" Waspinator waved cheerfully from his stand selling copies of his tell all autobiography.

"Hey, what's that about? How to make an art of getting wrecked?" Natsuki quipped.

"No! It'zzz Wazzzpinator's mazzzterpiece! Wazzzpinator even had Janna and Panda proofread!" Waspinator proudly stated.

"Oh, you had someone do something all book writers should. Whoopedy doo." Natsuki snarked.

"Natsuki, stop being mean to Waspinator. His writing is surprisingly eloquent. Er, no offense." Sayori scolded.

"None taken. Wazzzpinator izzz kind of lozzzer." Waspinator shrugged. Sayori bapped him with a newspaper, making him whine.

"Bad Waspinator! What did we discuss!?" Sayori scolded.

"Don't Zzzelf-depricate like that, it helpzzz no one." Waspinator sighed.

"Good. Now give us all the copies of your book you want." Sayori smiled.

"YAY! Thank goodnezzzzzz. No one wazzz buying." Waspinator sniffled.

Everyone, seeing the official Literature Club of the Multiverse take a book, took that as a good endorsement and bought some too, to Waspinator's joy.

"Wazzzpinator happy!" He sniffled.

"We did good." Monika shook her head.

"I still don't like him." Natsuki huffed.

"Are you *still* salty about him calling you 'No Mammaries'?" Yuri smirked. Natsuki blew a raspberry.

36.5 - Hobby Picking (pt. 2), by dancingRibbons

It was silent in the clubroom. The four AI girls sat at a desk each, facing each other, in a circle in the center of the clubroom.

Sayori carefully slid her thumb across the crease of the paper, then looked up at the other Dokis. She had, for her Hobby Loop, decided to try teaching everyone some origami skills.

Monika had folded one slightly lopsided crane and was working on her next.

Yuri was folding origami shuriken with a grin on her face. She had completed at least a dozen.

Natsuki grumbled as she struggled with her crane, which currently looked like a triangle with arms.

Sayori sighed, and got up, walking over to the annoyed pinkette. "Natsuki, you have the instructions upside down."

"...oh." Natsuki groaned. "I swear this paper—just—ugh! Is there anything simpler?" She tore at the failed crane, glaring at the pink paper.

"Well, yes. Just let me grab my origami book, and I'll try finding something simpler for you. Maybe a frog, or a plane, or a walking cra…" Sayori stopped as her fellow club member giggled, lifting up a chain of paper dolls. "Or you could just do that."

"Or I could teach her to make shuriken?" Yuri piped up. She tossed a shuriken towards Natsuki, who caught it, hand flashing pink to brace the impact of her girlfriend's hard throw.

"Nah, paper dolls are easier than origami. You can teach me some other time." Natsuki cut more of the paper figurines to resemble herself. "Hold on… Wingardium Leviosa."

The chain of dolls floated to arrange themselves around the room. "Nats, I thought this was my session?" Sayori jokingly asked.

"Quite right," the pinkette agreed, and the dolls promptly turned into figures of Sayori. "There, much better, right?"

"Yep."

36.6 - Mon-Ika the Octoling: Part 3, by dancingRibbons

(DDLC)/(Splatoon)

"Hi, nice to meet you! My name's Callie, and she's Marie." The black-haired girl stood up and shook Monika's hand.

The loopers were gathered at a cafè, sitting in a private booth. Pearl lounged on a sofa, while Callie and Marie sat on cushions diagonally opposite her. Yuri rested cross-legged on the floor, and Monika had joined her on a stool.

"So, what universe are you from?" Marie questioned.

"We're from the DDLC Branch of the multiverse. Spoiler alert, unless you like horror, dark comedy and death, don't play the game if you ever run into it."

"I'll take your word for it! Monika, since you're replacing Marina, you'll be hosting several Splatfests." Callie plopped back down.

"Splatfests…oh! Monthly events?" Monika blinked at her memories of the past Splatfests.

"Think of it as debates, except with Turf War instead of talking and thousands of people joining." Callie smiled, passing her a sheet of paper. "This is a list of all the Splatfests that have and will happen, including the events of the first game."

"Hm…" Monika examined the list. "Cats versus dogs, planes versus cars…these seem like very modern topics. Wait, heroes versus villains?! Isn't that from Smash Bros?"

"Yep!" Marie nodded happily. "Me and Callie were nicely surprised when we made it in as costumes."

Yuri peered over her anchor's shoulder. "And Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle splatfests."

"Even though we're a post-apocalyptic society, we still worship fax machines." Pearl deadpanned. "These are debate logs from the past. It's weird."

"Super Mushroom versus Super Star." Yuri shot right back.

"We're from Nintendo. Anyways, I'll pick the first topic, and Marina—or in this case, Monika picks the second."

"Could I keep this list?" her current co-host asked.

Marie waved offhandedly. "Of course! We have plenty of those."

"Great. Hey Yuri, I found some new debate topics!"

Yuri accepted the slip of paper, and read down the list. "Squid versus octopus? Sounds dangerous for some reason."

"That'll be in roughly a year, sometime during the Octo Expansion."

"Octo Expansion?" The purple-haired inkling raised a delicate eyebrow.

Pearl grinned with sharp teeth. "You'll see."

36.7 - Hobby Picking (pt. 3), by dancingRibbons

It was the fifth loop since Monika had originally proposed the hobby-sharing loops. Natsuki was looking forward to what her girlfriend was going to share, if partially because she could tease Yuri about it. The pinkette poked her head around the door…and her jaw dropped.

The clubroom was set up to resemble a clearing beside a waterfall and river. Stepping stones were systematically laid in the middle of

the raging stream, lotus and lily pads grew in a smoother area of the water, and multicoloured koi frolicked around the plants.

Forests of cerulean-leaved willow trees swayed in the wind, pink flowers releasing a mild, soothing scent in the room. Hummingbirds flitted around the trees, feathers shimmering with magenta and indigo light. Some nested in the trees, drinking up crystalline nectar. And the waterfall…the waterfall was encrusted with crystals, large and small, ranging from a clear amethyst to an opalescent fuchsia in colour. It wasn't enough to be called gaudy, but the crystals sparkled in the sunlight, cool pinks dancing across the water.

Natsuki lifted her right index finger, and a hummingbird landed on it. She noted that the feathers weren't just shades of pink and purple, but were exquisite crystals resembling the ones adorning the waterfall, and the hummingbird's eyes were polished pearls of onyx. The hummingbirds were living crystal golems. And as she looked around the forest one more time, Natsuki realized that the flowers, lotus and koi were also mineral.

She knew that Yuri had requested a room extension, but she hadn't expected this.

And in the middle of it all, her girlfriend sat in the centre of the waterfall, rose-tinted water falling around her shoulders. Her girlfriend looked serene, one with the world.

As Natsuki heard the gasps behind her, she said, "Yuri, where the fuck did you find the idea for this?"

Yuri opened her eyes. "From a painting in a Hub loop." She stepped out of the waterfall, brushing the water off in sheets. "It's called the Land of Lotus and Crystals."

"Fitting name," said Sayori's voice by the door. The hummingbird took off, and landed on Sayori's head. She was leaning on a tree. "It's breathtaking. I didn't know you had an eye for remodelling."

"Thanks, Sayori. Technically it wasn't my idea, but hey." Yuri shrugged. "We'll wait until Monika gets here…actually." A mischievous grin found its way onto her face. "Let's start without her. We're doing hide and seek! This room is a few kilometres square, thanks to our currently-missing President. We can go hide." The purple-haired girl pulled out some bracelets. "We get to use Looper abilities, but with some catches…"

"No destroying anything?" Natsuki piped up.

"That, no tampering with the code, and we can all use the bracelets to warn each other about the seeker—they're like smartphones. We also can't fight back, because that would make it too easy, though we can—and should—run."

Yuri pulled out a piece of paper, and scribbled the rules on it, throwing it at the ground. "We can also call each other, and once the half-an-hour time limit runs out, we'll be teleported back here. Plus, she gets a map, and we don't, so we can get lost."

"So we can't take off the bracelets?" Sayori picked up hers, and to her slight shock, the beige band clamped tightly around her left wrist.

"Once Monika tags one of us, the others get notified and the taggeè's bracelet breaks. They then get teleported to the spectator box." Yuri pointed up to a clear box floating high up in the sky. "Everyone clear?" Her friends nodded. "Then let's go!"

Monika walked into the room. "Hey, guys—woah!"

She took a moment to admire the worldbuilding that Yuri had pulled off, then shook her head. "Right. Aha, here's a note…"

Hey Monika,

This is my hobby. Ninja hide and seek. Rules are as follows…

Monika skimmed over the rest, and flipped over the note to find a map, showing her current location. "Hm…giant lotus bud in the centre…maybe they're hiding in there? Nah, too obvious." The President began to walk, then stopped and reached up to a tree vine, yanking it and tapping the girl who fell out on the shoulder. "Hi, Sayori. That was a bit easy."

"I wanted to go easy." Sayori pouted. "Hint hint: Nats and Yuri are in —" She was teleported away, and Monika spotted her Vice President pounding on the walls of the spectator block.

"One down, two to go."

36.8 - Rope Burns, by Awesomedude17

(DDLC)/(Legend of Zelda)

"Link!"

Link became startled at Malon's surprising shout and turned around, only to see an inferno at where Lon Lon Ranch was.

"I have an alibi. Go to Zora's Domain. Ruto can vouch for me."

"Who else would start a fire to burn all of those poor cuccos?"

"I understand why you'd suspect me but I didn't intentionally start a fire."

"Intentionally?!" Link recoiled at Malon's screaming.

"Wait wait wait, you got the wrong person!" Natsuki shouted as she made herself known.

"Oh really?"

"Yeah! It was Sayori. She somehow started a fire while jump-roping with Igno."

"Ingo, and why would he be jump-roping with Sayori?"

"Uh…she's that kind of free spirit."

"Ugh! Link, what do you…he left!" Malon stomped the ground in fury. Natsuki could see Link hightailing it to Death Mountain, which was honestly one of the more sensible actions he's done.

It was then that a stampede of animals, led by Sayori on horseback, ran by the two, headed straight for Kakariko Village. Malon looked over it and began to smile.

"Aw! She went through the trouble to save every single one! I like her!"

"She burned down your home, Malon." Natsuki pointed out matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, but she saved the cuccos!"

"...I can see why Cia's creeped out by you on occasion now."

36.9 - Mon-Ika the Octoling: Part 4, by dancingRibbons

(DDLC)/(Splatoon)

A week after Monika and Yuri met the locals…

Na na-na na-na na…

Natsuki!

Na-na-na-na!

Natsuki! Natsuki! Show us how you're bossy!

Nasty! Get nasty!

Win, let's have some fun!

Na na…ah-ah-na-na-na! Na na…ah-na na na na!

Na na! Nah na lay-oh ah-oh la~! Na na na nah oh!

Natsuki came to slight consciousness at the sound of a powerful, familiar voice.

' *Huh…who am I?'*

' *Right. I'm Natsuki. I just Woke Up. Loop memories…'*

The pinkette winced as attempting to reach her Loop memories was repelled by a sort of barrier. If Sayori was with her, her friend could probably do something to fix it, but otherwise, Natsuki was on her own. Her vision swam an acid, sickly green. ' *Is this a game?'*

The Octoling realized she was lying on a concrete surface, and curled tightly against the cold.

The Octoling realized she was wearing some sweet armor, and fully opened her eyes to look at it properly.

The Octoling realized a very old man with large, round eyes popping out of his face was staring at her trying to get her attention, and yelped, moving back and away from Captain Cuttlefish.

"Whoa whoa whoa, steady there! I'm a little Loopy at my age, so hold your tentacles!"

Natsuki relaxed. "Oh good, you're another Looper. Are you the Anchor of this place?" She shuddered inwardly at the thought that the abandoned metro station she seemed to be in could be all this Loop had to offer her.

"Nope, that honor would go to my granddaughters. Name's Captain Cuttlefish, but you can just call me one or the other. Do you have a memory block in your head?"

"...ergh, yes?" His visitor shook her head, the stern melodies already fading away. "What was…"

She trailed off at the sight of what looked like an eraser. "...that?"

"These are mem cakes. Rub them against your forehead and you'll get some memories back. Collect all of them and your memories will be restored." Captain produced some more. "Luckily for you, I always have a spare set on me in case Agent 8 gets replaced. Now, do you want to play the Baseline way, or go straight to the surface?"

"Hm… " Natsuki pondered for a bit, noting with slight disgust that her tentacle-hair was twitching.

She hadn't had any adventures in a while.

Especially not blind-playthrough type ones.

The visitor made her decision. "I'll go Baseline. How fun is it?"

"Tell me…" Cuttlefish helped her up out of her sitting position with a twinkle in his eye. "...how easily do you rage at video games?"

"I TURNED INTO AN OCTOPUS OH MY GOD WHAT THE HECK?!"

Natsuki was currently a fuchsia-pink octopus flopping wildly around the floor of the "tutorial" room, in a state of transformation-induced panic.

"Relax, relax!" Cuttlefish soothed over the intercom."It should be like a mental switch in your head. Just look for it!"

"AAAAAAAAAAA I FEEL wait a minute." The visiting looper pondered for a moment, then turned back into a humanoid, staggering a bit. "That felt weird."

"All the visiting Loopers say that. Now, are you going to complete the tutorial or not?"

"...fine." His current charge glared daggers at the radio, then kept going at completing the level.

36.10 - Hobby Picking (pt. 4), by dancingRibbons

"So," Monika placed her hands on the desk. She was standing at the front of the room, with the other three Dokis sitting in a circle in front of her. "It's my turn. And I've left the best for last."

Sayori examined the items in front of her. "A bunch of fish bowls, bags of coloured sand, pebbles, potting mix and moss, a stand, decorative items, and a dozen pots of small potted succulents?"

"Well, yes." The President grinned. "We're making terrariums! This is a chance for you guys to get wild and creative—not that you already haven't done that—with no Looper skills."

Yuri picked up a decorative aloe and ran her finger along the leaves. "Seems boring."

"We'll also get to collaborate on a giant walk-in terrarium I currently have in my Pocket." Monika added.

Natsuki whistled. "Okay, now I'm interested."

"So, first we all need to set up our terrarium shells. You can pick from the ones I've got: polygonal, bubble, plane, bottle or spiked. Just make sure they fit into your stand, or ask me for another one." Monika demonstrated by slotting her bubble shell onto her stand, then twisted it so that it sat cozily in the white wooden block. "Then we'll add substrate…"

Sayori carefully finished arranging her pebbles with tweezers. After she was sure that they wouldn't fall over, she then began layering sphagnum moss and soil over them with a tiny spoon.

She wanted to make a landscape scene. Two pebble hills on the sides of her polygonal shell, a blue-sand river flowing through the valley, a small house sitting on the bank, and four cute little squirrel toys playing on the moss-grass.

A hand tapped her on the shoulder. "Having fun?" Monika asked.

"Yeah. Who knew making terrariums was so soothing?" Sayori replied, taking a spoonful of blue sand and pouring it into the dent she had formed for her river. "What are the others doing?"

"Yuri's making a seashore scene with a seahorse. Natsuki's doing some inception—terrarium inside a terrarium. I think it's a neat idea." Her friend surveyed Sayori's valley. "I like terrariums—they represent life inside of a closed environment, untouched and pure. Kind of like that bubble you mentioned in a poem once."

"I guess." Sayori dug a small hole, and carefully planted some fittonia inside, smoothing out the surface of the soil. "So when are we going to work on the walk-in?"

"As soon as you guys are done." Monika smiled. "I'm already finished with my terrarium—I have a whole collection of them in my pocket—but I'll wait until—"

"Finished!" Natsuki said from the corner of the room.

"—you and Yuri—"

"Done here too." Yuri stated.

"—okay, just you. I'll wait until you're done with your terrarium."

Sayori chuckled. "Don't worry. Give me about five minutes. You can get started on the walk-in in the meantime."

"Ah." Monika laid back on a sloped, grassy hill.

Her fellow Dokis joined her, gazing at the frosted glass of the walk-in greenhouse terrarium roof.

"That took a while, didn't it?" smiled Sayori.

Yuri turned, facing her right. "It did. Worth it, though. Now I can boast to Alucard about having a better base of meditation than him."

Her girlfriend snorted, and they fell silent. It had taken two hours or so to fill in the landscape of the terrarium, with rocks, sand and saplings. The club members were currently resting on the side of a valley, while a river rushed a meter away. Mushrooms—brown, yellow, red—dotted the shores, joining cattails and reeds. The rustling of leaves in the wind calmed the senses, while mountains framed the background of the terrarium. "What happens when the Loops end?" Natsuki spoke up.

"...I don't know." Her club president got up, picking a cattail from the riverbank. She stroked it between her fingers, content. "As long as we're all still friends together by then, it'll be fine." Pinching one of the spongy brown fibers between her fingers, Monika grinned. She then tossed the rapidly-expanding cattail fluff at her friends.

"Ack! This means war!" Yuri choked around a mouthful of fluff.

The Dokis then had a good time prancing around the riverbank, snapping cattail heads and throwing them at each other, until Sayori single-handedly won the whole thing by using the Force to cream her fellow friends in the face with pillows of cattail fiber.

All in all, a good day spent.

36.11 - Mon-Ika the Octoling: Part 5, by dancingRibbons

(DDLC)/(Splatoon)

"What's in this level?" Natsuki asked.

"Fake Plastic Station?" Her newest friend grinned, waving his walking stick. "You'll see."

"I'll take your—whoa!" The salmon Octoling flinched back at the sight of a green similarly tentacle-haired humanoid girl revealing herself on a nearby pillar, holding a white-black gun.

Target acquired.

"Play nice, play nice…" Natsuki backed away, hands in the air in front of her.

Destroy .

"OKAY DON'T PLAY NICE HAVE IT YOUR WAY!" Natsuki dodged the bullets of green ink, wincing as some burned her skin, then fired right back at the Sanitized soldier. "Die die die!"

The enemy exploded into a puddle of Natsuki's ink. The visitor sighed. "Alright, there should be more in the next room. On the pillars…?"

Seek and destroy.

"...and there's more of them. Who would have guessed—ack!" She jerked away at the sight of the umbrella shooting towards her, inked a path, swum behind the enemy and quickly splatted the Sanitized Octoling.

Another charged, wielding a large yellow-black paint roller. Natsuki had some time to snort before ducking as the brainwashed/zombified girl chucked a triangular prism, landing at the feet of the salmon Octoling. She stared, frozen as her brain screamed.

Ohcrapcrapbombbombbomb—

The prism exploded, shattering Natsuki's armor but leaving her otherwise relatively unscathed. "Agh! Get here…wait a moment."

She threw a bomb of her own, then inked the nearest pillar and swum up it. As she'd predicted, the Sanitized soldier had terrible vision and walked right into the Splat Bomb, exploding into a puddle of Natsuki's ink.

"Alright!" She reformed and pumped her fist in victory, then gaped. "There's another room?" Natsuki dived through the door, and rolled her eyes when yet another Octoling enemy pounced from the pillars. She would later deny that she had ever shrieked when the enemy donned a jetpack and took to the skies.

"Just one more, you're doing great…" Cuttlefish cheered her on, then asked, "What's your name again?"

"Natsuki!" The Octoling ground out, dodging ink blasts from the enemy's jetpack. "What IS this thing?"

"That's the Inkjet!" The old Inkling informed her through the intercom. "You'll get to use it in some future stations."

"Sweet! HOW DO I KILL IT?!"

"The soldier will land in three seconds!"

The visitor ran to the similar icon glowing on the ground, throwing a bomb timed to explode when the Inkjet finally ran out.

Vrm vrm vrm vrm vrm…

A gate opened to in front of her. "Are those…three floating metal pieces?" Natsuki asked her informant.

"Ink them and touch the turn slide to beat the level." He answered, chomping on some crab patties.

Natsuki chucked a bomb at the small obelisk-shaped metal chunks, then smiled as the barrier broke.

Upon touching the marker…nothing happened.

"Uh…"

"Just wait. Any moment now." Cuttlefish assured her.

Suddenly, a cylinder shot up from the ground, forming a lift-like room around Natsuki's body. She blinked as the lift transported her back to the start in front of Cuttlefish. A hard object, shaped like a girl's face, fell into her hands. "That was weird. What's this?"

You paint the turf with graceful strokes.

With watchful eye, I breathe a sigh.

From sniper's perch, I go for broke.

Natsuki blinked. She turned to Cuttlefish. "...is this meant to be Shakespeare?"

"Who's Shakespeare?"

"...never mind. What's next?"

Cuttlefish looked away, whistling. "Let's go meet our fellow loopers."

36.12 - It's Not Fluff. It's Too Thin to be Fluff, by Awesomedude17

"As thin as possible, Yuri. Crepes are meant to be super thin." Natsuki said.

"You're really taking this seriously, Natsuki."

"I am the desert…dessert girl, Yuri. I absolutely have to make dang sure that these delicacies are at their very best."

Monika smiled at the sight before her. Sayori then entered the room, smile beaming from her face.

"Hey girls, I'm here now. Ooo~ Pancakes."

"Not pancakes!" Natsuki barked back. "Helltaker is gonna push my pet peeves so much, I swear."

"Helltaker?" Yuri asked.

"Puzzle game slash dating sim hybrid, emphasis on puzzle. Free on Steam. Harem of demon girls." Sayori explained plainly. "Right?"

Monika nodded. "She's right. It was free so I ended up trying it out. Catchy music."

"Yeah, and they referred to what is obviously crepes as pancakes." Natsuki said with annoyance. "Speaking of..." Natsuki flipped the crepe expertly off-handedly. "Yuri, powdered sugar."

Yuri handed Natsuki the sifter filled with powdered sugar as Natsuki dexterously rolled up the finished crepe, placing it on the pile of equally well made crepes. After a quick dusting of sugar, Natsuki presented the group with today's sweet treat. "Behold!"

Monika and Sayori clapped.

"Now then…dig in?" Yuri asked.

And so they did.

Compiler's Commentary:

36.1: Yggdrasil isn't ready for the straight fire that would result if Monika and Pearl went head-to-head on a beat.

36.2: Damien like "Nah brah I'm just here for the free food." Valid.

36.3: Easily the chillest boot camp Monika has ever been to. Commander Shepard would be disappointed.

36.4: Don't worry, Natsuki actually does like Waspinator, if only because he's Sayori's friend. She just has an image to uphold.

36.5: Sayori's come a long way since that time she accidentally folded her own sprite in-wait shit I wasn't supposed to tell anyone about that .

36.6: WELL THAT'S NOT OMINOUS AT ALL.

36.7: Yuri Ojou-laughs at your basic bitch "aesthetics"

36.8: Most any sane person wouldn't risk trying to pull a mob of cuccos out of a burning building. More dangerous than trying to pull a drowning person out of the water, that is. But Sayori's always been too nice for her own good. Even the savage cucco respects this unconditional compassion, which probably makes Sayori the most dangerous person in Hyrule this Loop…

36.9: After this harrowing experience, Natsuki gave Monika a heartfelt apology for *that one Loop* .

36.10: Through the long eons and the occasional glitch, it is friendship that keeps the Literature Club going strong.

36.11: Sadly, that's all there is for "Mon-Ika the Octoling" so far. Haven't seen dancingRibbons on the threads for a while, so who knows. Ah well, that's how these things go sometimes.

36.12: FORESHADOWING! Maybe. Maybe not. Sometimes crepes are just crepes, y'know?

Chapter 37

37.1 - Sakura and the Literature Club! by YukiAkuma

(DDLC)/(Cardcaptor Sakura)

It was always a treat to begin a Loop snuggled up in bed. Not really *her* bed, but it was still…her bed.

Her Unawake self's bed, that is.

Slowly opening her eyes, Sakura glanced towards the clock by her bedstand. Time to get up…she definitely had school today. So, out of bed, set the stuffed toy she had been hugging in her sleep on the pillow, reach into her closet for her uniform…

Huh. High school uniform? It looked kinda familiar, but Sakura was still too half-asleep to tell whether it was her Loop memories or her own memories making it seem so. Before she could sort it out, though, another glance at the clock reminded her that she really had to get a move on. If she was late, her friend would be late, and if her friend was late…well okay nothing would happen, she was late as often as not, but still. She felt a responsibility to make sure her friend wasn't late!

"I'm off to school!" Sakura called to the house as she stepped out the door, munching on a slice of toast as she fastened her skates to her feet. She felt four Pings, and automatically sent off a Ping of her own.

Sakura rolled the ten yards to her friend's house - seriously, they lived right next door to each other, this was pretty convenient - and rapped smartly on the door. "Heeey, get up sleepy head, you're gonna be late for-"

"Good morning Sakura!" chirped a voice from behind her. Sakura span around to see her friend. Her pretty, ditzy, slightly clumsy,

peach haired friend, in her light gray blazer, ochre vest, blue skirt with white socks…innocent, bright blue eyes…

"...Nope," Sakura said after a while. "Nope, nope, no way, definitely not," she continued, calmingly flicking her wrist and producing one of her Cards from the aether. "Maze."

Sayori reached out a hand. "H-hey!" But then, the air around her best-friend-for-this-loop lensed, folded in on itself, and Sakura was nowhere to be seen. Sayori stared for a moment, then pulled out her phone. "Heeey, Monika? I think she's played our game."

"...Okay, that might complicate things," came the voice of her club president.

Sakura sat in her deck chair, looking up at the false sky of her Maze-space while doing her best not to totally freak out. Sure was lucky Dash wasn't a real animal, or she'd have probably rubbed all his fur off by now with how firmly she was petting him. "Why in the Tree would Doki Doki be Looping? What Admin would even allow it? It's a videogame even in-setting it doesn't even make sense it would be Looping!" Sakura looked down at her hand in suddenly-dawning horror. "Wait does that mean I'm made of DATA right now?!"

Fortunately, before Sakura began to really consider the implications of no longer being flesh and blood - it was bad enough that the stars in most branches felt really weird - she was interrupted by a pink, polka-dotted rectangle appearing directly in her line of sight.

["I don't blame you for overreacting - I hesitate to even call it an overreaction - but surely we can talk about this?"] the text box read, in English. Sakura winced, glancing at the name tag at the top. 'Monika'.

Sakura took a deep breath, then looked down at the foxlike spirit in her lap. "Do you think she can hear us, Dash?" she asked conversationally, trying to keep her voice level.

["Yes, I can hear you Sakura."] the text box promptly replied.

Sakura sighed, looking up at the sky again. She contemplated for a while, then looked down at the text box again, as if looking Monika right in the eyes. "Okay, I just have one question first."

["Yes?"]

"Who's the Anchor?"

"So is this Sakura person…important?" Sayori asked innocently.

"Important?!" Natsuki looked up from the box of manga she was rifling through. "Cardcaptor Sakura is *the* shoujo manga! The quintessential Magical Girl manga! It introduced an entire generation - an entire *international community* to cute girls who fall in love and still kick ass! So many manga and anime have homaged it, the second magic wand basically became the go-to 'this is a magical girl' prop, and the dresses she wears get referenced so much, and-"

"Huh. I've never heard of it," Sayori said.

Natsuki shot up. "Never heard of it?! How could you possibly-"

Sayori giggled. "I'm kidding~"

Before Natsuki could decide whether or not to slug her, the door to the club room opened. In she strode, that Magical Girl icon, dressed up in *their* school uniform. It suited her. Natsuki could imagine her battling monsters or capturing another card wearing that uniform.

Monika, sitting at a desk to the side of the room, looked up from one of her monitors. "Ah, Sakura, thank you for coming. I hope we can-"

The sudden magical pressure shut Monika up even before Sakura raised her hand to summon a card from the aether. "Libra," said the Magical Girl. The card promptly vanished again, blue energy rushing out of it and coalescing into a ghostly…pan scale. Albeit, a pan scale with its pans replaced by a sun and moon.

Monika blinked. Sayori let a momentary frown flash across her features before adopting a neutral expression. Natsuki just stared with barely-suppressed glee at getting to watch a Magical Girl icon *use magic* . Yuri glanced at Natsuki for a moment, shook her head, then stood up, closing the book she had been reading. "All right, Miss Kinomoto. Please explain for those of us who are not *massive fangirls* what it is that spell does."

Sakura paused halfway through moving a chair around. "Oh, nothing major. It's just a lie-detection spell," she admitted with a casual, no-big-deal air.

"Fair enough," Monika said with a shrug.

Yuri rounded on Monika. "It is *not* fair enough!" she insisted, turning back to Sakura. "Don't you think it's a little rude to walk into a stranger's home and hook them up to a magical polygraph?"

Sakura ran a hand across the back of the chair, giving Yuri a thoughtful look. "I…suppose, yeah. We aren't really strangers though. That's sort of the problem?" Sakura dragged the chair across the floor, turning it around and straddling it backwards - facing Monika. She leaned her arms on the back of the chair. "I'll…make it up to you later. I really need to do this. It's important."

The room went silent. Monika tried not to fidget. This…was an older Anchor. She had to be. The confidence was unmistakable, and anyway, didn't Cardcaptor Sakura come out twenty years before Doki Doki Literature Club? Was that a factor?

On the other hand, no one had ever mentioned that Cardcaptor Sakura was Looping before. Maybe she was young, and this was all bravado from the first few thousand Loops.

"Monika-san," Sakura said, gazing at her with a steady gaze.

Monika managed to quell the reflex to jump. "Yes?" This was stupid. Why did she feel so nervous?

"Are you sorry?"

"Yyyes?" Monika said slowly.

The sun half of the Libra scale dropped sharply, lifting the moon up as far as it would go.

Sakura adopted a bright smile. "Well, I'm convinced," she chirped, and hopped out of her chair. Monika fell out of hers.

37.2 - Zombozo's Misery, by Boohoooo!

(DDLC)/(Ben 10)

Monika sighed as she walked home after a long day at school. She was the only one Awake currently, so she wasn't really sure what to do.

"Maybe I should go to another protest?" She mused idly. However, she suddenly felt a chill in the air. She looked around suspiciously, getting into a fighting stance.

"Hello…I think we haven't met. I'm Zombozo. I'm your worst nightmares given form!" Said Zombie Clown cackled.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHH! AHHHHHHHHHHHH! AHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Monika screeched.

"Heh, I haven't even done anything yet! Now- Wait, you're a Looper too right? I guessed based on that…flamethrower…you pulled… outta nowhere…oh, this will be unpleasant…"

Zombozo's screams of agony soon fill the air.

Much later, Albedo stared down at the broken, battered and burned form of Zombozo.

"Hmmm…yeah, maybe getting you Activated wasn't the most effective plan…" He drawled.

"Shut up…" Zombozo weakly whined. Albedo shook his head.

37.3 - In Which the Prince of the Underworld Finds Out He's a Video Game Character as Well as What a Video Game is

Or: Zagreus Still Won't Sit Down

By Awesomedude17

(DDLC)/(Hades)

Zagreus Awoke and found himself in a very unfamiliar situation. Sun, he knew well. He had felt it on his skin every time he escaped as well as when he met with Heracles from the world where his father was a flamboyant villain with hair of literal fire.

But this world's buildings were completely different. They were unrecognizable. And the girl approaching him. Who was she again?

A childhood best friend? Like Thanatos? Heracles told me there were more worlds than ours. Maybe this Sayori can help me out.

Apparently she wanted him to join the literature club. Fine by him. If he went along, this might allow him to figure things out.

And then things went weird. The world became more…solid yet it was still undeniably fake. It bugged him a lot. Sayori quickly shook her head and he felt a Ping, and then three more and then he Pinged himself.

She looked at him with a knowing look and put on the kind of devious smile she had only seen Megaera show every so often.

"Well Sayori, I suppose you know where this is going then?"

"Yeah Zag. I do. Come on, I'll make it a surprise for the others."

"And the cupcakes are finished. Now we wait for the visiting Looper." Natsuki said as she set down the plate in the center of the classroom.

"Alright, they're almost here. I can feel it." Yuri said.

"You mean smell them?"

Yuri gave Natsuki a look.

"Hey, vampire."

Yuri didn't stop looking until the door opened.

"Hey girls! We got a visitor!" Sayori said gleefully.

"Yeah, we felt the fifth Ping too. Bring them in."

"I am a man, just so you know." Zagreus cheekily said as he casually walked in.

"Well you don't need to snap back." Monika replied.

"Oh trust me, I meant no harm in my remarks. I just enjoy some banter from time to time. You know what I mean?"

"Well, yeah."

"Hold on hold on hold on!" Natsuki spoke up.

"Err, yes? Is something the matter?" Zagreus said, tilting his head in confusion.

"Yeah. I know you. You're Zagreus!"

"Huh. Heracles told me this was a thing, but I wasn't expecting to come across this situation on my second go outside of father's realm."

"Ooo, you met Hercules? Which one?" Sayori asked.

"Uh, the one where his archnemesis is the flamboyant, flame headed version of father." Zagreus replied.

"So Disney's Hercules. Right, that checks out. Zag, check this out." Natsuki spoke up.

"If you say so." Zagreus got close to her as she took out a laptop. Zagreus looked at it in amusement as the screen lit up, and after seeing Natsuki manipulate it, she brought up Steam and saw what was undeniably him, and the title 'Hades' right above his artist's rendition.

"So that's what my world is like on the outside. Question, what is this thing?"

"Err, a computer. We're technically a simulation inside one, if you wanna get more meta." Sayori replied.

Zagreus just stared at Sayori, then Natsuki's computer then back to her.

"That last time I was this confused, I was in one of my father's seminars."

"That's just about what I expected from someone who just got out of Ancient Greece." Monika remarked.

"I suppose a series of explanations are in order miss..."

"Oh right. I'm Monika. That's Natsuki and Yuri and I assume you already know Sayori, right?"

"Of course. Charmed to meet you all. I am Zagreus, Prince of the Underworld, son of Hades and Persephone."

"Hold on." Monika held out a hand. "I've been reading some old Greek scriptures and I barely saw your name in there."

"Oh gods, don't tell me that Orpheus' tale actually-"

"If said tale was that you died and then became Dionysus, then yes. That's what was left of the records of you."

"Blood and darkness." Zagreus facepalmed in exasperation. Well, at least Hades got his wish regarding that song.

"Although Greek tales are so contradictory that that alone could account for your existence, at least in your world." Monika shrugged.

Zagreus sighed. "Right then. Explanations please and thank you. I'd rather not simmer in embarrassment."

Some time passes…

"I see, so that explains quite a lot actually. I suppose Achilles was correct in his assumptions regarding the Adamant Rail, though it seems that this 'Hub' world has yet to capitalize on the Aspect of Lucifer…yet." Zagreus mused.

"Thank the tree, because the idea that Satan himself rebelled against God and his army of archangels with a laser gun is scary enough as is." Natsuki said with a cold sweat.

"Well what did he expect would happen? He rebelled against a god. Even though I am a god myself, father is certainly more powerful than I am. Have you been skewered by Gigaros? I can tell you that it hurts. Quite a bit."

"Tell me about it. He game over'd me several times before I got his patterns down."

"There's a reason why the Olympians disliked hubris from mortals." Yuri admitted.

"I suppose." Zagreus replied. "Such an ego would infuriate father, let alone others who have a sense of righteousness."

"Speaking of, do you expect dear old dad to join in?" Natsuki asked.

"Eventually, though I feel he'll be on the later end of my journey through Yggdrasil." Zagreus admitted with a shrug. "All I know is that Thanatos has joined me."

"And how close are you?" Sayori asked.

"Well…he did come from when Megaera convinced him to join our coupling, if that means anything."

" ***YES! OT3!"*** Natsuki shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Err…what?"

"Don't mind her." Monika spoke up. "She doesn't admit it but she plays matchmaker sometimes. Sayori and I certainly would know about that."

Natsuki shot Monika a glare while Yuri looked away with a blush.

"Err…alright then ladies. If you don't mind me, I suppose I'll consider trying out some literature myself, if you don't mind."

"Absolutely not. We are a literature club after all. Have a seat." Monika closed her eyes and let loose a gentle smile.

"Err, no thanks. I prefer to stand."

Monika opened her eyes as her smile became more forced.

"No no. By all means, have a seat. Relax. We'll bring some books for you and maybe we'll write some poems too."

"Do I really need to sit down for that, Monika? I can easily do that standing up or leaning against the wall."

"Is there something wrong with chairs for you?"

"Oh no. I know they have their uses. Father has a magnificent one himself back home. It's just that I myself don't see much reason to indulge in them when I could be out and about. You know what I mean?"

"I think I do. You have no respect for rest, after all."

Natsuki was about to speak up when Zagreus beat her to the punch.

"Well I never needed it and I doubt you ever needed it yourself."

"I beg to differ, Zagreus."

"As do I, Monika."

Sayori jumped in between the two suddenly. "Okay, I know where this is going. Zagreus, I get you've kinda got that charming gentleman with an edge to yourself but please don't aggravate our club president."

Zagreus nodded.

Monika put on a smug look. "Thank you Sayori."

"Hold on, Monika. You're being really irrational about this yourself, especially with the hypocrisy. You got the 'no sleep' policy after all."

Monika began to sweat as Zagreus looked at her with amusement. Sayori then continued with her admonishment.

"So what if Zagreus doesn't like to sit down? If you don't wanna rest, he doesn't have to either."

"Sayori, it's just…I get it's irrational but I cannot imagine anyone not sitting down at least once. It makes no sense. Even I sit down sometimes, even if I don't really sleep."

"And that's just a piece to the puzzle that is the issues that you have that you have not fixed at all." Natsuki spoke up. Yuri got up and tried to keep Natsuki at bay.

"If something doesn't make sense, I get really irritable, alright!" Monika said as she got close to Natsuki.

Zagreus leaned on a desk and then said, "Oh, I think it makes perfect sense. Then again, I am immortal while you are…kinda mortal."

"Kinda mortal. Oh ho, you did not just say that to me, bucko!" Monika said as she teleported in front of Zagreus.

"Indeed I did. You're being really petty about your issues."

"Oh, and now who's the hypocrite now? If I recall, the Greek pantheon was certainly petty."

Zagreus put a hand to his chest. "Oh my. You wound my feelings. I'll have you know that I don't really follow the sensibilities of my family on Olympus, Monika. I'm more than content to let them be so long as they don't involve themselves negatively with me."

"So you let them give you their food and drink and not their grievances?" Monika said, unaware of how she's losing this 'debate' she's having with Zagreus.

"I wouldn't need them. I know the taste of nectar and ambrosia and can get them easily, even in the Underworld. What do you have?" Zagreus shot Monika a look.

"Natsuki's cupcakes." Monika said as she grabbed one and chomped down into it, letting out an overly audible moan of

contentment.

Zagreus rolled his eyes as he took one himself and bit into it.

"Okay, I'll give you that much, it is absolutely delicious."

"Thank you so much! I put in a lot of effort to make it just right." Natsuki chimed in.

"You should trade lessons with Eurydice if you visit, Natsuki. I'm sure you both could learn something new." Zagreus said with a genuine smile.

"I say you're being overly dramatic now, Zagreus." Monika spoke up.

"Look who's talking, miss hypocrisy and irrationality. You've been relying too much on coffee to keep awake." Natsuki spoke up. "Tell you what. How about if Zag sits down, you have to take a nap?"

"Oh, fuck off." Monika stomped the ground.

It was then that Zagreus decided to defy the alternate title of this snippet and sit down, grinning smugly and knowingly.

"Oh, I like this one!" Natsuki grinned.

Yuri then made some intrigued noises.

"...not *that* much, you horndog."

Monika growled in frustration.

"See that crankiness? Nap time!" Natsuki replied.

"Yay!" Sayori shifted into her pajamas. "Sleepover time!"

Zagreus looked over the group as they one by one changed into sleepwear.

"Well, if nothing else, this whole trip went to places I did not expect. Not that I am complaining after all. So far, this has been great." Zagreus got up from his chair.

"Glad you're having fun." Monika said with an underlying sense of snark.

Zagreus chuckled. The rest of this trip was going to be fun for sure.

37.4 - Absurdly Powerful Literature Club, by Tetradrachm

In the Variants where the Literature Club existed in a real school, outside of a computer program, its Looping members tended to simply use it as an extension of their normal activities. They'd invite members of the school in, discuss literature and goof off as best they could with their new friends for the Loop, and generally just enjoy ordinary high school life.

That wasn't so easily possible in this particular Variant.

"We got the funding for the Science Club?" Sayori asked, one hand lightly gripping the official Sakura High Literature Club-distributed yoyo on her waist.

"An *anonymous* donor sent us the final half million we needed," Monika smirked, her eyes darting around the nondescript high school hallway as they walked towards the club room, a pile of legal documents in her arms. "Of course, we all know it was Yuri's mom—"

"Stop right there!" Five figures in full black bodysuits shot out from behind doors, corners, and even a locker and assumed ninja battle stances in front of them. "The Principal wants to see you in his office —and those documents, too!" the leader shouted.

Monika and Sayori exchanged a look. "You can tell the Principal, and the rest of the criminals that run this school, that the information about their administration's corruption in these papers will be all over

the headlines of the school newspaper tomorrow," Monika said triumphantly.

"Not if we have anything to say about it," the administration ninja challenged her.

Ten seconds later, the thoroughly subdued and tied up ninjas groaned in pain as Sayori and Monika strode past. "What is that, the seventh group of goons we've taken down this week?"

"Eighth," Monika said, "Natsuki dropped a pair of Drama Club members into the dumpster out back yesterday. According to her they'd been trying to swipe some of our permission slips."

"What? Why not just ask us for them?" They pushed through the Literature Club double doors to enter its massive club room. Easily the size of a regular school's gym, its elaborate wood paneling, long tables, and painted portraits of previous Literature Club leaders on the walls resembled a state legislature's meeting hall. Considering the "business" they got up to in here, the comparison wasn't so far off.

Natsuki looked up from signing off on a grant to one of the other clubs as they came in.

"You got the evidence?" she asked.

"Yup!" Monika dropped it onto the table with a *pftumpf* . "We beat a squad of admin kids to get back here, though, so I'm sure they'll attack us again a few times before tomorrow."

"I think they might send the phys ed teacher after us again," Sayori said with a hint of concern.

"Is he *actually* a death robot, or does he just act like one?" Natsuki wondered, tapping her official Sakura High Literature Club-issued pen against her chin.

"Probably real," Sayori answered. "We know the Vice Principal has a storeroom full of killer robots in the basement, so…"

"Right, right."

Monika sighed. "I still don't really get how this high school has more military strength than the national government. These animesque Variants don't make a lot of sense when you look too closely…"

"That's just it, you shouldn't look too closely! We are operating on full bore anime logic here, baby! I am so here for it!" Natsuki nearly shouted, hands balled into fists at her side as if she were about to shout an attack for five episodes straight.

"Well, it's only because the administration is so ridiculously powerful that the students have entrusted our Club with the power to fight back," Sayori reminded Monika. "With this proof of corruption, we might finally have enough evidence to topple them once and for all!"

"Of course we will, we—wait, where's Yuri?" Monika asked.

Natsuki waved a dismissive hand. "She's out using her vampire hypno skills to deprogram a bunch of students who got mind whammied by the art teacher."

"What, again?"

37.5 - The End Result of an Accidental Arsonist Cook and a Reality Destroying Cook Making Burger Dogs, by Awesomedude17

(DDLC)/(Warhammer 40,000)

Everything is on fire on a random planet that was suddenly invaded by Tyranids. To most, it'd be an unmitigated disaster.

To Leman Russ and Sayori of the Literature Club, it was good timing. The planet was already evacuated because of Leman alone.

The fact that somehow there was someone worse than him at cooking amused Trazyn the Infinite greatly, even if Monika was not amused at the slightest.

"You're seriously recording everything happening here?" Monika asked in resignation.

"Absolutely. This will make great entertainment for my collection." Trayzn replied with a lot of glee.

Leman let out a guttural growl of annoyance. "This whole mess over an idea to make cheeseburgers in the form of hot dogs."

Sayori did nothing but continue her comical silent crying.

At that point, the Swarmlord appeared out of nowhere, leading Monika to take out a shrink ray, and make the monster tiny, right before Leman stomped on it anticlimactically.

How bizarre it must be for an outside observer to this event, and how the group overall was barely reacting to their surroundings to the point where the Necron was the most emotional of the four.

Tis the natural state of Loopers, it seems.

37.6 - Kill the Literature Club, by tsubaki410

(DDLC)/(Akame ga Kill)

Mine Awoke in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar house. Forcing down her immediate shock, the newest Looper of Night Raid took a deep breath to steady herself as she checked her Loop Memories.

' *Huh. Looks like I'm an ordinary high school student. About time I got a change of scenery!'* Despite her relative youth by overall

Looper standards, the teen genius was, to her annoyance, something of a "late bloomer" compared to her contemporaries. The dual Anchors had each had their first Fused Loops before they were a thousand repeats old, and neither Sayo nor Ieyasu had been much older when their respective turns came. Mine knew, from everything she had learned during her first tentative go-arounds, that such swift progress was highly unusual, but it still galled her to no end that she had been forced to slog her way through nearly double the number of Loops as the others before the stupid Tree saw fit to send her someplace new.

' *At least some of the Variants were interesting,'* she admitted, smirking as she remembered the time she and her comrades had saved the Federation from the evil Anarchist Revolution. The literal mountain of sweets they'd received from President Makoto and Vice President Honest had been well worth the trouble, as had the look on Glorious Leader Esdeath's face when Tatsumi had suddenly dropped to one knee in the middle of their final duel, just before declaring "Gotcha!" and punting her into orbit. Shaking her head to clear it in preparation for the new day, Mine hopped out of bed to get ready.

"Okay," the pinkette murmured as she slowly raised a fist to knock on the club room door, "No need to be nervous, just let your memories guide you and everything will be fine." Nodding to herself, she rapped quickly on the door, then turned the knob and strode in. Inside, the other club members were gathered around the tea table, all turning and smiling as she approached.

"Hello, Mine," Monika greeted, "Would you like some tea? You look like you could use some help Waking Up."

The assassin nodded thankfully. "That would be great, thanks. Things have been kind of Loopy all day today." Taking the open spot beside Yuri, Mine chuckled as the taller girl Unpocketed a package of wafer-thin chocolate cookies. Opening the package and setting

several of the treats on the nearby tray, Yuri offered the plate to her clubmate.

"I hope these are to your liking. The others said I should try to be more…engaging with visitors. It's not easy, though."

Mine gave the knife-wielder a small smile. "You're doing fine. And these look wonderful. I admit, I have something of a notable sweet tooth, though it's not the absolute biggest in my Loop. That honor goes to Chelsea. I can count the number of times I've seen her without a lollipop in her mouth—per Loop, anyway—on one hand. Thank the Admins she's not Looping, stealing my cake in Baseline is bad enough!"

Sayori grinned at this. "Sounds like she'd get along famously with Natsuki," The Pink Sith chirped, "That girl has a HUGE appetite for treats. She's who you're Replacing, by the way, which unfortunately for Yuri means a whole week without cuddles, but I guess that's a small price to pay for making a new friend. So!" Her fellow pinkette leaned into her face so suddenly Mine nearly choked on her tea, "What's your home Loop like?" Setting her drink back down on its tray, Mine sighed.

"You really want to know?" The others frowned at her somber tone, and Monika cleared her throat awkwardly.

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. We're not exactly strangers to bad-"

"No, it's fine." Tensing and untensing her muscles for several seconds, the sniper finally brought her gaze back to her new friends. "To put it simply, it's horrible. Like, not as bad as 40k, from what the others have told me, but a little worse than Worm." Seeing their eyes widen, she pressed on, "I'm normally an assassin, part of a rebel group fighting to overthrow a corrupt and cruel empire. Over the course of Baseline, most of the people I know, many of whom I love like family, are killed off one by one, generally in brutal ways. I myself die in the anime version of our Hub back-up, although thankfully our

Loop seems to generally play out more like the manga. In any case, it's not exactly a fun time, goofy Variants notwithstanding." With a final sad smile, she picked up a cookie from the plate. "I hope you'll forgive me for sparing you the graphic details." For a moment, the local girls were still, the only sound being the soft crunch of their guest chewing her snack. Then Monika blinked.

"That…wow, that's rough. I mean, it's not exactly as nasty as what I pulled in our Baseline but still…my heart—at least the code for it—goes out to you, kid."

Mine looked at her. "Uh…code?"

Monika nodded. "Yeah, you haven't noticed, huh? Can't say I'm surprised, most visitors don't unless they're familiar with our Hub back-up, and it sounds like you're not. Okay, try not to scream, but… this isn't a fleshy Loop. It's a computer game."

Now it was Mine's turn to stare. And stare. Until… "What."

Standing on the namesake beach of Beach City, Natsuki paused, volleyball in one uplifted palm. Cocking her head, the Looping Literature Club's resident Majin reached up and comically extended her ear with her free hand. Around her on both sides of the net, the other players furrowed their brows in concern.

"Everything okay, Nats?" Steven inquired. The presently-a-Gem Looper shoved her ear back into place and shrugged.

"I thought I heard someone screaming. Eh, must have been my imagination."

37.7 - Velvet Kitchen, by Venku

(DDLC)/(Persona 4)

Time is a gift to be treasured by all. When time is stuck on repeat, most view this opportunity to learn as they can.

Igor was one such being. Though he was aware of the ebb and flow of time, he also held a special responsibility. As an Anchor, it was his task to guide, if possible, Loopers. These Loopers would either be native to his branch or visitors.

He took this task as he did others. Philemon, his master, was aware of the Loops even though he was not Looping himself. As a part of Philemon's wager with Nyarlatoteph, Igor utilized the Velvet Room to guide their guest to their ultimate purpose.

These purposes ranged from a remarkable young man who was the barrier between a primordial desire to end things and humanity; to another young man who proved to a vengeful goddess how children of man do accept truths they'd rather ignore.

While he wished he could claim a guiding hand concerning a trickster and false hope and desires, he had to admit that his attendant bore the lion's charge for that miracle.

The Velvet Room, Igor's domain, served a purpose to Loopers and non-Loopers, guide them on their path. As a genius loci, it took on the shape of what the guest most needed.

Even if what the guest needed was a kitchen.

Natsuki Awoke. With millennia of understanding time's fickle nature, she thought she was immune to what the Tree sent her way.

The tree thought that she didn't spend enough time in *this* location.

The woman singing soprano in the background was the first thing she noted after accessing her Loop Memories and sending a Ping. She received quite a few responses in return. A small frown formed on her face. Before she could say something, a clear voice spoke.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room. Should you find yourself adrift in the sea of souls, know we provide a steady anchor for what's to come."

She turned her gaze to the other man. Noticing his *enormous* nose, Natsuki paused.

"You're the Anchor, right?" she asked

"Indeed. This is the Vel…"

He paused, holding up his hand as he issued a deep sigh. "Young Lady. Might I ask you not to touch the stove behind us?"

Natsuki paused as she turned to look over his shoulder. The setup was similar to the Looping Literature Clubroom, even down to the stove. There were three people in front of it. A tall, blonde man, a woman with curly hair, and a woman with short hair. A glance indicated they were related.

"Why?" she asked.

At that time a loud BOOOOOM could be heard as the shock wave reverberated through the Velvet Room.

The stove itself was destroyed. Black smoke rose from it while a black gelatinous blob oozed from the opening and began to run. The short-haired woman gave chase while the curly-haired woman used a fire extinguisher to smother out the flame on the blonde man.

Igor had a deadpan stare while surveying the damage, while Natsuki's left eye started to twitch.

"Can I...give them cooking lessons?" she asked, the urge to repeat what she did to Chie and others rising to the forefront.

"Be my guest," Igor responded. "They destroyed the method used on how to fuse Persona. And caused massive damage here."

The way his tone cut through the Velvet Room as a disappointed father caused the others, Elizabeth, Margaret, and Theodore, to turn their gaze to the duo. Igor just sighed and shook his head as Natsuki let loose a loud cackle.

Elizabeth paled. Her only thought? This might be a rough loop.

Meanwhile, in Inaba, Chie Satonaka and Yukiko Amagi were talking in the Amagi Inn. Both were awake and both were just catching up on gossip.

Suddenly Yukiko's spine stiffened. "Chie!" she gasped.

"I feel it too, Yukiko. It's as if some poor schlub managed to piss off that pink-haired girl." Chie responded.

Yukiko sighed. "Well. This loop may be interesting after all."

37.8 - The One Where the Depressed AI Talk, by Boohoooo!

(DDLC)/(Borderlands)

It was an average day on Pandora. The sun was blistering, the Skags were picking at corpses and Claptrap was screaming as he ran for his life from Bandits.

"WAAAAAAA! MINIONS, SAVE ME, SAVE ME!" He pleaded.

"I'M GONNA EAT YOUR EYE!" A Psycho laughed insanely. Thankfully, at this moment, they are all hit with sleep darts, falling over asleep. Claptrap sighed in relief.

"Hey Claptrap." Sayori said simply.

"Sayori! My favorite out-of-Loop minion! I knew I could count on you to come to my aid!" Claptrap happily wheeled around her. Sayori giggled and gave him a pat.

"Anytime." She stated sincerely. Claptrap whooped.

"Wanna go play some video games?" He hoped.

"Sure."

"HUZZAH!"

"SON OF A B****H! How are you so good at this?!" Claptrap whined as he lost to Sayori for the 7th time in some Street Fighter parody.

"I have my ways." Sayori said mysteriously. Claptrap grunted. Suddenly, Claptrap's phone rang.

"OH BOY!" Claptrap ran over to it like a kid on Christmas.

"Hello? Is this Joe?" What was clearly Handsome Jack using a Fake Accent asked.

"Joe who?"

"JOE MAMA!" Jack laughed in his regular voice.

"GOD D**N IT JACK! DON'T YOU RUN A COMPANY?! DON'T YOU HAVE BETTER THINGS TO DO?!" Claptrap complained.

"Yeah, obviously. I just like to mess with you, Crappytrap." Jack shrugged. Claptrap threw his phone across the room, where it shattered.

"...You ok?" Sayori asked in concern.

"I don't know why I thought someone would sincerely want to call me." The Steward Bot sighed.

"I'd sincerely want to call you." Sayori promised, and she meant it.

"...Thanks. sometimes you feel like the only one." Claptrap sighed. Sayori pat the beanbag chairs they'd been using, and Claptrap sits down.

"If you want to talk, I'm here." Sayori assured.

"...Am I really so unlikable? Like, I know I'm kind of a screw-up, but I try... I try so hard..." Claptrap mumbled. Sayori gave him a comforting pat.

"Sucking at something is the first step to NOT sucking at something." She informed. Claptrap seemed to mull over that.

"Don't tell anyone this but I'm jealous of you."

"Really? What do I have the Great Claptrap doesn't?"

"Friends that do more than tolerate you."

This gave Sayori pause.

"You have me Claptrap. And I'm sure if you put yourself out there, you'll find plenty of others." She softly assured.

"...You think so?"

"I think so, yeah."

"...Thanks Sayori."

"Anytime."

And the two sat in peaceful silence.

37.9 - Overdue Meeting, by Venku

(DDLC)/(Persona 3)

Sayori Awoke. Ever since time was stuck in infinity mode, there were a few things that she did. Check her Pocket for her notes. See if there were any Ping responses. And finally, access her Loop Memories.

She paused. Surely this could not be right. *Surely* the Tree would not place her back here.

Standing in front of the mirror of the girl's bathroom, she looked at her uniform. The small symbol on her breast indicated she was at Gekkoukhan High. If she was there then she was in one of the few places she'd rather not be.

The sounds which came from her lips upon discovering she was in the Amala Branch were the sounds of an angry kitten who just had a bath.

Settling down, although furious about the joke being played on her, Sayori went about the Loop. In this Loop, she was one of the recent transfer students who had won a scholarship for the full year. Housed in one of the nearby dorms, her life for this Loop consisted of school, Volleyball Team, and Fashion Club. Though curious why those were selected, Sayori figured she would be able to make use of the Fashion Club to work on some of her cosplay ideas.

Navigating a hallway, Sayori was intercepted by a call of "Excuse me!"

She paused and turned her head to the sound of the voice. A small internal sigh was made as she recognized the speaker, a Mitsuru Kirijo. Her red hair standing out against her smooth skin, and her body something that a model would enjoy. Though Sayori's eyes narrowed some. Did Kirijo seem nervous with her here?

"Yes, Senpai?" the visiting Doki asked.

"Would you come with me to the Student Council room?" Mitsuru asked. She wanted to place her hand on the younger woman but had a feeling it'd not be smart.

Sayori paused as she asked. "Is this something to do with the time issue on my schedule?"

Mitsuru nodded, pleased that Sayori did signal she was Looping. "Yes! I must apologize but you've been booked for too many classes. There'll be a chance to go over your schedule there." Not the best answer, but in the open hallways she was trying to avoid undue stares.

Sayori nodded her head and followed the other woman.

Arriving inside the Student Council room, Mitsuru turned to face the other woman. "I'll start first by saying the Anchor had received your message," she added. "Though since you're here I had thought to clear the air" she added. Mitsuru recalled the last time that Sayori was here. Most of the Tatsumi Port Island loopers made it their mission to avoid the peach haired Doki if they ever ran across her in that loop.

Sayori looked at the other woman in curiosity. "What is there to discuss?" she asked as she took her seat. "I am aware that your Evokers were used to summon your abilities. Modified from actual guns. Mind you, I had a close friend who manipulated me in my baseline to commit suicide. Those references are a sore point" she added, idly touching her fingers together.

"Understandable," Mitsuru replied as she brought a tea pot closer. "Want a cup? It's not as good as Iroh's but it is quite refreshing."

Sayori gave a brief smile. "Thank you" as she fixed her cup of tea. Taking a sip, Sayori nodded. "Impressive. Might I get a bag later for my Pocket?"

"Of course," Mitsusu responded. She took a sip then asked. "You're familiar with other Persona users?"

"Naoto, Fuuka, Chie, Kanji, and Yukiko all Looped into our club," Sayori commented as she took a sip. "Naoto elaborated that you utilized your evokers to invoke death's embrace while there's another group in Tokyo who rip off their mask to show signs of rebellion" she added. Looking at Mitsuru for a moment longer as she added. "I do not object to what you can do. In fact I might like to have a discussion with your group or another with a concern I have. I do strongly object to the methods used, for reasons stated."

"I see" Mitsuru replied as she closed her own eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. "Though our Wild Card is the Field Leader, I do lead the S.E.E.S. squad and the Shadow Operatives overall. We did not take into account how our abilities might look to an outsider. I do apologize for any offense caused."

Sayori paused for a moment longer before slowly nodding her head. "I've forgiven the person who manipulated me into what I did in my branch. While I'll never *like* ," and here she put emphasis on the word, "the way you utilize your ability, I cannot and will not fault you for having it. Apology accepted. Was that the purpose of this visit?"

"One of them" Mitsuru explained. "It's something the other Wild Cards from this group, the Inaba group and the Tokyo group had mentioned that I'd like to try with you." Seeing Sayori's expression, she elaborated. "They each said that sometimes just sharing common stories or anecdotes might help bridge the gap. I'd love later to discuss some literature with you but for now I'd like to share some stories from our Baseline."

Sayori blinked for a moment and nodded her head. "I'm interested. In both the literature discussion and the story." She leaned back, listening to the other woman talk.

"So let me get this straight. Your baseline has your MC," Sayori had used the term to describe Minato, "in essence *flirt* with every female he runs across?"

Mitsuru nodded her head as she took a sip of tea. "Yes. Oddly enough we get rather jealous when we catch wind of him with someone else. He also was invited into each of our dorm rooms."

The Doki shuddered. "Please tell me he didn't try this when Awake. Or that it's a common trait among the 'wild cards'?"

"Takeba, one of our Loopers, decided to teach Minato a strong lesson," the redhead replied. A small lazy grin as she pulled out some photos from her pocket and placed them in front of Sayori. "And the Inaba team, per Shirogane and Kujikawa...Naoto and Rise" Mitsuru elaborated with Sayori's confused expression. "Confirmed that in their baseline, if Narukami cheated, they had their suspicions, while the Tokyo people," and here she cleared their throat. "Injured Kurusu in his guardian's shop. Said guardian did nothing as his daughter was one of those that confronted him."

"I assume that Looping Wildcards learned not to do that?" Sayori asked. When Mitsuru nodded her head, she smiled. "Good."

"Did I ever tell you about the hot springs incidents?" Mitsuru asked. She disappeared for a few moments to handle a phone call. "And my apologies on the call. Shirogane and Akihiko are part of the Shadow Operatives and awake this go-round. Had to coordinate plans for this Loop."

Sayori nodded her head. "Understandable. And what hot springs incident?"

Mitsuru chuckled. "Our baseline has a class trip to a local inn with a hot spring. Naturally, it's a major attraction. Segregated of course. Men have their own time, women another."

Taking another sip of tea, Sayori asked "Did someone sneak in when they shouldn't have?"

Mitsuru nodded. "I think the boys just didn't realize they overstayed their welcome. And they tried to sneak out. Mind you, with someone who acts as mission support, another who is an android, a sharp archer, and myself it would be difficult. Sometimes they succeed." She then had a predatory smile on her face. "And sometimes they don't."

Intrigued, Sayori leaned forward. "I see," she replied as she took a sip. "What happens when they don't succeed?"

"Execution. Normally I'd just stab my rapier through an icicle but as I wish no harm to them, just a lasting lesson, I have them encased in blocks of ice" Mitsuru elaborated. A slight tap on the table. "It lasts sometimes from six to twelve hours. To make sure the point stuck, even though I did not stab them, I still called it an execution."

Sayori giggled as she nodded. "Those meanies," she muttered.

Mitsuru leaned over and grabbed a sheet of paper. Writing two phone numbers on it, she gave it to Sayori. "One's Shirogane's phone number. The other is Haru Okumura's phone number from the Tokyo group. Both are awake and each have their own version of hot spring stories if you're interested."

"Might be more one of my friend's interest. But I'll definitely give them a call. Thank you" Sayori added as she pocketed the number.

Time had passed. The simple art of sharing experiences can, if both parties are receptive, share experiences, and allow insight into the psyche of the other. Mitsuru and Sayori shared experiences from their baseline as well as various loops.

The tea had started to taste the same, so Sayori cleared her throat. "I think we have shared relatively enough experiences, right?" she

asked. A small sigh as she leaned back for a moment. "I've got my own questions though it seems like I might need to talk to the Inaba crew on something." Making a mental note to look precisely where Inaba was to Port Island, she continued.

"We got off on the wrong foot. I'd like it if we could spend some time later this loop. Just to get to know each other?" Seeing the shocked reaction on Mitsuru's face, she continued. "I'm not going to lie. How this is set up really does suck. Blaming you for this is just silly though. Friends?" she asked as she held out her hand.

A genuine smile spread across Mitsuru's face as she shook the other woman's hand. "Friends."

Sayori grinned. "Yay! Oh I still want to discuss some literature with you later. And…" whatever else Sayori was going to say was stopped with the chiming of the bell. An 'Eep!' came from the Doki's mouth as she grabbed her stuff ran out the door. "Gottagotalktoyoulater!"

Mitsuru chuckled, pleased with the outcome.

37.10 - Monika's Microgame Madness, by Awesomedude17

(DDLC)/(Wario)

Monika Awoke as she noticed someone speed by on a moped. It was then that she looked deeper into her Loop memories and...

"Wario, huh? Well, I suppose I've been meaning to listen to Mona about creating those so called microgames.

Wario was picking his nose when he heard a knock on the door. He got up and opened it to see Mona and some woman he never met at the door.

"Hey, Wario. My friend decided she wanted to work for you. Finally!"

"Eh? Oh sure. Come on in. I'll need to do an interview, or whatever." Wario replied.

Monika already was unsure what to think. Wario was never known for professionalism, or general manners. Still, she couldn't knock his business acumen. She walked into the mess of a house and then sat down at the table.

"So, I'll need a smattering of short and sweet games. Anywhere between three to ten seconds each. Every so often, you can go nuts and make, get this... a *minigame* !

Monika nodded. "I can do that easy. I've been coding as a hobby. I don't even care about being paid either."

"Good! You're hired. I'll call you in when I need games. Now go and do your thing. I got stuff to do and places to be." Wario immediately got up and went right back to his couch before channel flipping. "Eh... one thousand channels and the only good thing to watch is in some stupid language."

"¿Como pudiste? ¡Ese pan de ajo era para mi sobrina!"

Monika looked at Mona, who nodded in approval.

What did she just get herself into, Monika will never fully comprehend.

37.11 - "Notice Me", by Venku

The Loop started.

Sayori Awoke and sent out a Ping. With three responses and no access to her Pocket, she figured out this would be a regular Loop. To her, that was fine.

The Heart and Soul of the Literature Club had something she wanted to practice anyway.

Natsuki came in early. She Awoke and received three Pings in response. Having already run into Monika, they had agreed to keep this as close to Baseline as possible.

That notion went out the window as she walked into the Club Room. A loud, rhythmic beat was vibrating through the room. Natsuki paused, listening to the lyrics.

"Huh. The singer is a dweeb. He can rap, though" she muttered, following the sound of the beat. It led her to a side door. This door was added to the Club and was only accessible when everyone was Awake.

Inside, she was surprised. Sayori was dressed in a sailor seifuku and was swinging her hips and dancing, Sayori-style. Natsuki was leaning against the door for a moment while Sayori continued, vibing to the beat.

Eventually, the smaller Doki cleared her throat. "Sayo! What are you doing?"

Sayori smirked. She sensed Natsuki's approach and did not respond for now. Still dancing, the other Doki replied: "I had a Hub-Loop recently and picked up this dance. Thought I'd practice it."

"It's unique," Natsuki replied.

"I know!" Sayori chirped. She eventually used a remote to turn off the radio. A small giggle escaped her lips as she faced Natsuki. "I had felt the rhythmic beat, and if I ever met a Looping Jedi, I wanted to challenge them to a dance-off!" the Vice President explained.

Natsuki smirked as she nodded. "Whatever it takes to win, right?" she asked. A small pause. "Meeting in about a half-hour. You

gonna...?"

Sayori nodded. The MC should be approaching the steps to the school outside. "He's coming. I'll be sure to meet him. Monika is trying to come to terms with her last Loop, so I'll be stepping in today. That's the only difference for this Loop."

Natsuki nodded. "I'll clean up here." As Sayori left, Natsuki closed the door. While the singer might be a 'dweeb', as she called it, Natsuki did like the lyrics. So she turned up the music.

Natsuki began to vibe with the beat, dancing and swishing her hips. She did not notice Yuri entering the room. Nor did she notice Yuri closing the door.

How did she notice Yuri there, one may wonder? Simple. Yuri, in a richer voice, remarked: "Senpai noticed you."

Natsuki yipped.

37.12 - Poetry Of the Looping Literature Club - Natsuki's Early Loops, by Wookywok

Last Thursday

Have you ever heard of Last Thursdayism?

It's the theory that the entire universe

People, cities, civilizations, planets, stars, you

Was all created last Thursday.

All your memories

Fake

All your relationships

Fake

All of history

All fake

Until last Thursday.

I wasn't really a believer in it

Until I got handed the proof.

King of Poets

The King of Poets sits in his castle in the sky

Perfecting his craft

He has no need for ink

He simply calls upon the words

And they leap onto the paper like trained seals

Nouns, adjectives, verbs

They are all he needs

He doesn't eat or drink or even breathe

The words sustain him

And when the poem is done

The King of Poets tucks himself into bed

And dreams of words too complicated for even him to tame

Like "a" and "the"

Venom

It already smells in here

It's a bathroom and there's puke everywhere

Perfect to hide the reek of poison

The fangs are needle-thin, you don't even feel it.

But you do feel the venom.

It hits immediately

It twists your flesh into impossible shapes.

It melts your organs into sludge.

It makes you question everything.

The venom makes you go numb, one tiny bit at a time.

There goes an eye

And a finger

And your brain

Until all that's left is your soul.

And as that goes numb with the rest of it

All you can think of

Is *what's happe*

I never knew pythons were venomous.

Compiler's Commentary:

37.1: Well, everything will definitely be alright here :3

37.2: Zombozo's feeling the Pagliacci Blues, here.

37.3: Zagreus-1, Monika-0

37.4: I dunno about y'all, but Sayori vs. The Librarian in the season 2 finale is definitely in my Top 5 Anime Fights.

37.5: If Sayori had tried to make her pudding-cookies, there wouldn't have even been a planet left.

37.6: Just offscreen from the volleyball game, Onion is munching on popcorn while he watches this conversation play out on his laptop. Mine's sudden scream makes him chuckle.

37.7: Natsuki suffers no fools in the kitchen. She'll make competent cooks out of them if it kills them!

37.8: Sweet Sayori, kind friend to all, even the most obnoxious robot in the universe.

37.9: Overcoming personal biases through civil conversation? WHAT SORCERY IS THIS?!

37.10: Monika being Monika, she hid a secret verse in each of her microgames; all together, they formed a poem about how much Wario smells.

37.11: I prefer Rockwell's "Somebody's Watching Me", personally.

37.12: Poetry? In *my* Doki Doki Literature Club fanfiction?! It's more likely than you think.